NFL PREVIEW 2017

Sports Illustrated

DOUBLE ISSUE

SB LII
THE PICK
PATS over
PACKERS

SI.COM / SEPTEMBER 4–11, 2017

THE PATRIOTS' KRYPTONITE (MAYBE)
P. 32

ADRIAN PETERSON'S NOLA CODA
P. 104

Plus
SCOUTING REPORTS *AND* THE 40 MMQB
By Andy Benoit

31 TEAMS
1 GOAL: *STOP*

AARON RODGERS

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THE SUPER BOWL

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LINEUP
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NFL PREVIEW 2017

AUTUMN IN NEW ENGLAND?
With Tom Brady in top form, 31 NFL teams are scrambling to hasten the Patriots' fall.

Photograph by Al Tielemans

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An athlete and a young fan help one another

SI HAS REGIONAL COVERS THIS WEEK:

Photo Illustrations by
BRYCE WOOD

BRADY COMPOSITE: BOB ROSATO, DAMIAN STROHMEYER, STREETER LECKA/GETTY IMAGES; RODGERS COMPOSITE: SIMON BRUTY, AARON M. SPRECHER/AP; JOHNSON COMPOSITE: SCOTT BOEHM/AP AND RALPH FRESO/GETTY IMAGES; WATT COMPOSITE: CHARLES KRUPA/AP AND DAVID J. PHILLIP/AP; NORM HALL/GETTY IMAGES (49ERS); JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES (BEARS); SAM CRAFT/AP (BENGALS); PETER AIKEN/GETTY IMAGES (BILLS); LARRY FRENCH/GETTY IMAGES (BROWNS); JASON MILLER/GETTY IMAGES (BROWNS); PHELAN M. EBENHACK/AP (BUCCANEERS); STACY REVERE/GETTY IMAGES (CARDINALS); RICK SCUTERI/AP (CHARGERS); JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES (CHIEFS); AARON ONTIVEROZ/THE DENVER POST/GETTY IMAGES (COLTS); RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES (COWBOYS); PATRICK SMITH/GETTY IMAGES (DOLPHINS, REDSKINS); DREW HALLOWELL/PHILADELPHIA EAGLES/GETTY IMAGES (EAGLES); MIKE EHRMANN/GETTY IMAGES (FALCONS); KATHY WILLENS/AP (GIANTS); PAUL JASIENSKI/AP (JAGUARS); EVAN PINKUS/AP (JETS); JIM ROGASH/GETTY IMAGES (LIONS); ANDY CLAYTON-KING/AP (PACKERS); DANNIE WALLS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES (PANTHERS); JOE SARGENT/GETTY IMAGES (PATRIOTS); ERIC LUTZENS/THE DENVER POST/GETTY IMAGES (RAIDERS); KELVIN KUO/AP (RAMS); MADDIE MEYER/GETTY IMAGES (RAVENS); WESLEY HITT/GETTY IMAGES (SAINTS); GRANT HALVERSON/GETTY IMAGES (SEAHAWKS); AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES (STEELERS); ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES (TEXANS, TITANS); HANNAH FOSLIEN/GETTY IMAGES (VIKINGS)

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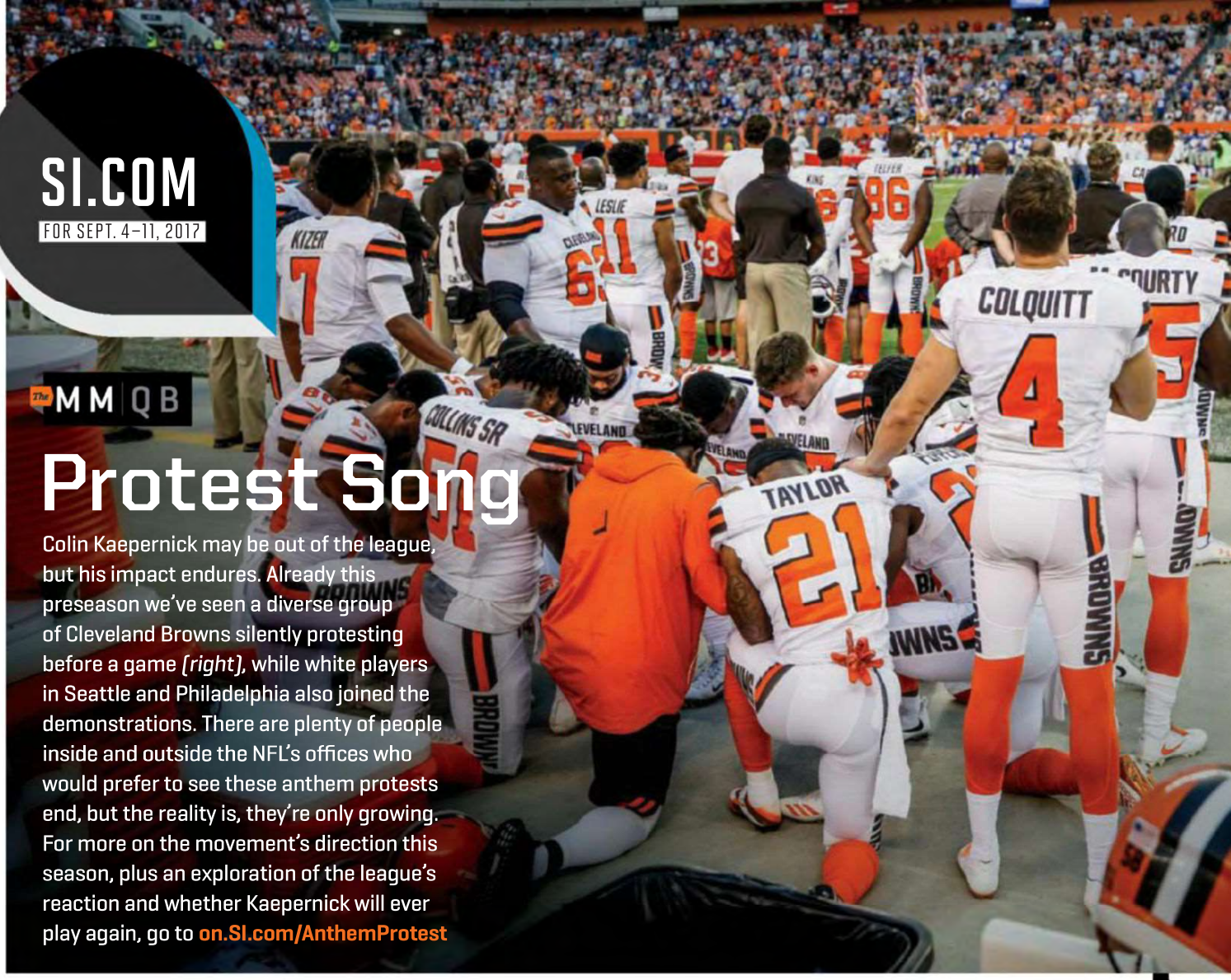


The MMQB

Protest Song

Colin Kaepernick may be out of the league, but his impact endures. Already this preseason we've seen a diverse group of Cleveland Browns silently protesting before a game *(right)*, while white players in Seattle and Philadelphia also joined the demonstrations. There are plenty of people inside and outside the NFL's offices who would prefer to see these anthem protests end, but the reality is, they're only growing. For more on the movement's direction this season, plus an exploration of the league's reaction and whether Kaepernick will ever play again, go to **on.SI.com/AnthemProtest**

+

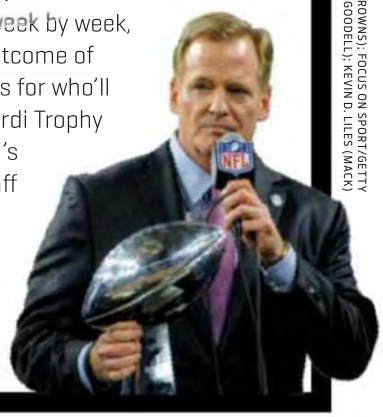
Pulling Rank

ANDY BENOIT'S 400 MMQB

Which young star would you pick to anchor your D: Raiders defensive lineman **Khalil Mack** or Chargers linebacker Joey Bosa? Who's the NFL's best receiver: the Falcons' Julio Jones or the Steelers' Antonio Brown? The MMQB's Andy Benoit is here to settle all your debates. He ranked the league's top 400 players using a simple criterion: Does Player A perform better at his position than Player B? Find his results in our team scouting reports *(page 62)*, and for full rankings, sortable by position and team, go to **on.SI.com/400**

Crystal Football

The NFL's opening kickoff is right around the corner, and The MMQB is ready with a slew of picks and predictions. For the micro-minded, Albert Breer will take you week by week, picking the outcome of every game. As for who'll lift the Lombardi Trophy in February, SI's entire NFL staff contributed playoff and Super Bowl LII forecasts at **SI.com/NFL**



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SHOULDERS WERE MADE FOR GREATNESS.

NOT DANDRUFF.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ROBERT BECK

1 of 3

Leading Off

Money (and Lots of It) for Something

BY BEN BASKIN

Floyd (Money) Mayweather won the megafight in Las Vegas last Saturday night to go 50–0, one win better than Rocky Marciano's mark for the best unblemished record in boxing history. But it was Conor McGregor who was still partying at 6 a.m. Sunday morning.

At the Encore Beach Club, an endless expanse of adoring fans swarmed McGregor. They stood on couches and tables, climbed aboard shoulders and railings, scaled pillars and palm trees, just to catch a glimpse of him. They held up poster boards of his face and chanted *olé, olé, olé*, as they had throughout the week. They reached out to touch him, kiss him on the cheek, tell him that they loved him, that they are proud of him, that he's their true champion.

If you had just showed up for the afterparty, the only clue you'd have that McGregor had lost would have been the black-and-blue shiner under his left eye, which was also swollen, but just slightly. Besides, the bruise didn't clash with the green, blue and beige three-piece paisley suit he was wearing.

Hours earlier, referee Robert Byrd had stopped the bout 1:05 into the 10th round as a woozy McGregor staggered around the ring while the 40-year-old

McGregor taunted Mayweather in addition to flashing his boxing skills.

MGM
MAYWEATHER
REGOR

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT BECK

2 of 3

Leading Off

Mayweather chased him, wailing away at him. McGregor later said that he "deserved to see the final bell." But Byrd made the correct decision, saving the obdurately proud Irishman from suffering any more punishment.

While the fight ended mostly as expected, the beginning surprised. For the first few rounds, McGregor, 29, the reigning UFC lightweight champion, looked like a boxer. A competent boxer. Even a good boxer—despite having never boxed as a pro. It seemed that he might even do what he had been saying he'd do for the last three months: outbox one of the best boxers of all time. Other than a few (O.K., maybe more than a few) illegal rabbit punches to the back of Mayweather's head, and his penchant for clinching from behind in what looked like an outtake from *Dirty Dancing*, McGregor stayed true to his word and didn't turn the showdown into a street fight.

But Mayweather also followed up on his promise that the fight wouldn't last a full 12 rounds. He has a brilliant boxing mind and processes information inside the ring faster and better than anyone. His game plan, which he devised with his father and trainer, Floyd Sr., was to let McGregor tire himself out. Over the first three rounds McGregor threw 115 punches while Mayweather threw only 28, and it did look, for a moment, as if McGregor was winning.

By the seventh round, though, McGregor had noticeably slowed, and Mayweather went on the

Mayweather let his opponent tire, then got busy in the sixth round.

TMT
KATHER
EGOR

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ERICK W. RASCO

3 of 3

Leading Off

attack. By the ninth, McGregor was wobbling, fatigued. And in the 10th, Mayweather simply decided the fans had seen enough, and it was time to end the fight.

But that's what it was: a fight. Not an event or a spectacle or a charade, as so many had been deriding it. Of course, Mayweather was the better fighter—as he has been in every one of his 50 bouts—but he was facing an actual opponent. "I was a little taken aback by the disrespect I was shown," McGregor said afterward.

He earned respect from the 14,623 at the T-Mobile Arena and millions of pay-per-view buyers. McGregor landed a total of 111 punches, 30 more than Manny Pacquiao did against Mayweather in 12 rounds in 2015. He connected on 84 power punches and 25% of his total punches, both totals better than Canelo Álvarez's against Mayweather in '13. Even Mayweather admitted, "He was a hell of a fighter standing up. It kind of shocked me."

But it was Mayweather who earned his 50th win, then confirmed and reconfirmed and re-reconfirmed that he was re-retiring. This time for good, he said. He had walked away two years ago, until McGregor presented a unique opportunity. "All of us do foolish things sometime, but I'm not a fool," said Mayweather after the fight. "If I see the opportunity to make $350 million in 36 minutes, why not?"

So maybe Money truly is retired. But if an opportunity arises, well, as he said, he's not a fool. □

After weeks of verbal sparring, each fighter earned the other's respect.

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Bethany Hamilton Pro Surfer

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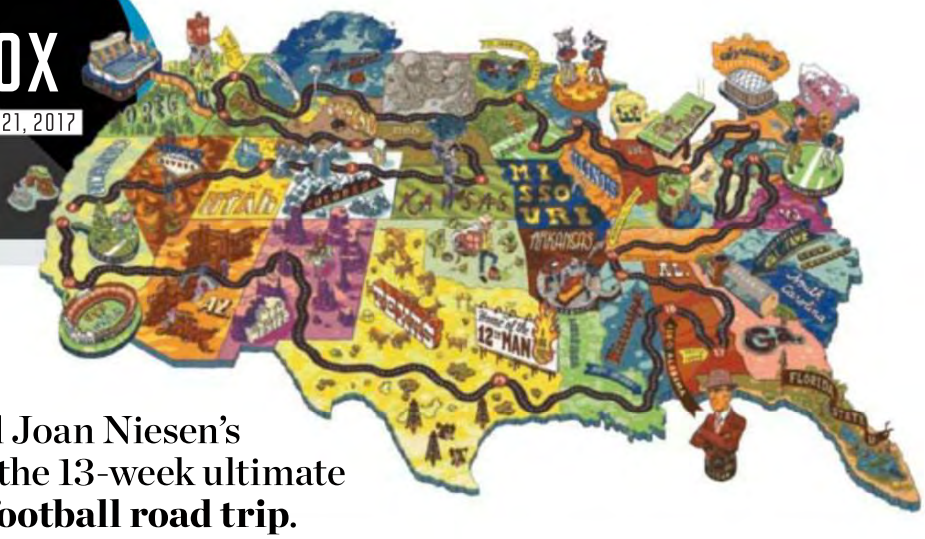
INBOX

FOR AUG. 14–21, 2017



I enjoyed Joan Niesen's piece on the 13-week ultimate **college football road trip**. I just hope the food advice is better than the driving recommendations. Although the Pacific Coast Highway is indeed a beautiful drive, it has been closed south of Big Sur because of mudslides since early last winter and won't be open for at least another year.

Dean Simpson Jr., VISALIA, CALIF.

It's hogwash to imply that conferences, like the **Big 12**, should be judged purely on the number of players drafted. College football is much more than a minor league for the NFL. I'd always rather watch unstoppable Air Raid offenses than monster SEC linemen opening holes for an endless string of three-yard gains.

Charles Heller
ANNAPOLIS, MD.

ANDREW DEGRAFF (MAP); JAMIE SABAU/GETTY IMAGES (COVER); DAMIAN STROHMEYER (RUSHIN); JANULLA/GETTY IMAGES (KNEE); KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES (TACKLING)

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It's good to see coaches investing the time to study better ways to **tackle,** but I hope they were not advocating aiming the top of your shoulder to the opponent's hip when they say to "track the near hip." That would increase the risk of neck injuries since it requires lowering the head and leaving it vulnerable.

Stephen LaSalle
LOUDONVILLE, N.Y.

COVER

After reading Andy Staples's lengthy story about the demise of the Big 12 in the **College Football Preview**, I found it funny to see SI rank five schools from the "troubled" conference in its Top 25.

Sherry Cross
MOVILLE, IOWA

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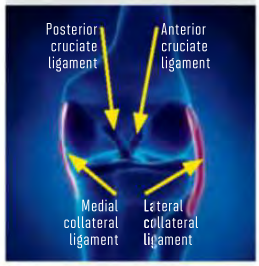
POINT AFTER

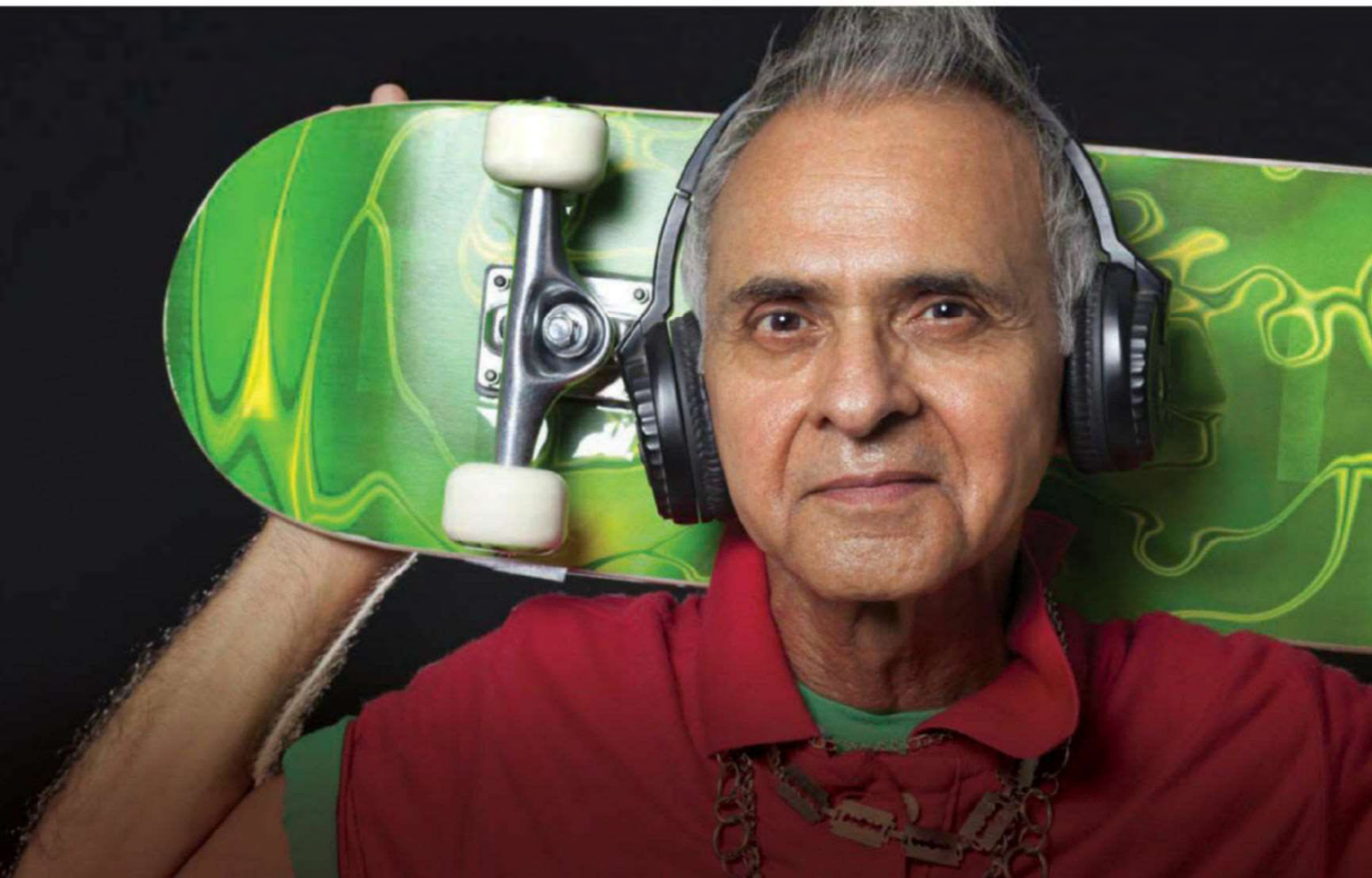
Steve Rushin rocked it with his column on sports and song, even demonstrating a fairly impressive knowledge of classical music. As famed composer Sergei Rachmaninoff once said, "Music is enough for a lifetime, but a lifetime is not enough for music."

Jay Ahuja, CHARLOTTE

CORRECTION

In a letter clarifying the proper anatomy of the knee, the accompanying graphic inaccurately identified the two collateral ligaments. The diagram below is labeled correctly. SI regrets the error.





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SCORECARD

Edited by **JIM GORANT + TED KEITH + SARAH KWAK**

SETH WENIG/AP; RON C. ANGLE (COVER)

VENUS VENERATED

Since her U.S. Open debut 20 years ago, the tennis world has changed and Williams has been partly responsible

BY S.L. PRICE

AT THE TIME it felt dangerous. At the time, as tempers flared and snipes about the black girl's "demeanor" or "unfriendliness" rang out, as her parents raised questions about racism on the tennis tour, the ugliness that consumed the 1997 U.S. Open seemed unstoppable. Few, if any, sporting events in America had been so charged, so flammable. Certainly no Grand Slam had ended on a more dispiriting note.

Remember? There was Venus Williams and her semifinal opponent, Irina Spirlea of Romania, colliding on a changeover because, as Spirlea later said, "She thinks she's the f------ Venus Williams." There was Venus's father, Richard, responding by calling the 23-year-old Spirlea a "big, ugly, tall, white turkey," and stating that he and his daughter had both heard opponents on tour use the n-word. There was Venus, 17 years old and alone in the interview room after losing the final to Martina Hingis, being badgered by white reporters—as a black journalist stormed out in protest—to address her father's comments.

Witnessing all that unfold was a horror; you wished someone would step in and make it stop. Yet, 20 years later, with Venus returning to the Open as its most revered American and her sister, Serena, regarded as the greatest women's player ever, perhaps the events of 1997 have proved oddly constructive—healthy, even. Precisely because no one would make it stop.

By "no one," of course, I mean

the forces in other sports—commissioners, owners, front-office officials, tradition-bound or timid teammates—who often quell the airing of culturally explosive issues. I mean the same forces that, lately, seem to make it impossible for quarterback Colin Kaepernick to find a job.

"All this political correctness: It doesn't work," says Oracene Price, the Williams sisters' mother and then coach. "Why hold people back from saying what they really believe? It's kind of dumb."

In tennis, such control remains unthinkable. The sport has no singular commissioner, and with varied organizations—the ATP, WTA, ITF, as well as each Grand Slam event—representing their own interests, top players (and agents and family) wield extraordinary clout. There is no mechanism to keep someone—no matter how voluble—from turning the sport into a showcase for the most divisive topics, so long as he or she keeps winning.

"Stick to sports" is a phrase tennis left behind decades ago. Arthur Ashe, Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova and Renée Richards eloquently embodied, respectively, racial equality, women's rights, human and gay rights, and the trans experience. The once-elitist game had evolved into an unlikely laboratory of cultural change, but the process was never smooth. Venus, for one, seemed stunned by the fallout from her father's charges.

"This moment in the first year in Arthur Ashe Stadium, it all represents everyone . . . having a chance to play," she said in that press conference before it went fully off the rails. "So I think this is definitely ruining the mood, these questions about racism."

True, it would've been more peaceful if everyone had made nice. Ashe Stadium's debut, and the fact that the '97 Open began on the birthday of Althea Gibson, the first black athlete to win a Grand Slam, set up a tidy narrative about the sport's inclusiveness. But Venus never disavowed her father's words, and her experience that year vented real tensions; figures like Zina Garrison testified to a tour cool to those of her skin color. By fortnight's end, tennis proved that it still had far to go.

"I'm tall, I'm black: Everything's different about me," Venus said during that Open. "Just face the facts."

So as the Williams sisters climbed to dominate the tour, the issue of race never fully faded. Tennis, in other words, is much like the world; one difference, though, is that the power roles are reversed. Serena boycotted a South Carolina tournament in 2000 because the Confederate flag flew over the state capitol. Serena and Venus boycotted the Indian Wells tournament for 14 and 15 years, respectively, for what they perceived as racial hostility from the crowd. The United Arab Emirates tried blackballing Israeli Shahar Peer in 2009, when it denied her a visa to play in Dubai, only to have defending champion Andy Roddick of the U.S. boycott the tournament and Venus publicly raise the issue during the trophy ceremony.

Anger, eye-rolling: Every player's statement had its detractors. Some want athletes to just shut up and play. But it's no small thing that, in 2010, Peer was granted a visa and played in Dubai. As ever, the sport is better for having such issues honestly aired and argued.

How do we know?

Because this year Venus plays Flushing Meadow as she did in 1997—without Serena, who is expecting a baby any day now—making it easier to see how esteemed she has become. Much of that is due to her revitalized play. Some comes from the dignity revealed by personal trial. But part arises from the sense that, in two decades, Venus never backed down. And the cheering she hears in New York City will sound, indeed, like gratitude. □

Any player can turn the sport into a showcase for the most divisive topics. "Stick to sports" is a phrase tennis left behind decades ago.

GO FIGURE

11

Home runs by the Phillies' Rhys Hoskins in his first 18 games, the fastest ever to reach that number. No other player had done so in fewer than 22 games.

1

Pitcher who has lost a no-hit bid on a walk-off home run. Dodgers lefty Rich Hill became the first on Aug. 23 when the Pirates' Josh Harrison went deep in the 10th inning for a 1-0 win. Hill had lost his perfect game on an error one inning earlier.

5

Errors committed by the Mariners in the first inning of Sunday's 10-1 loss to the Yankees. Seattle became the first team with five in an inning since the Cubs on July 2, 1977.

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NFL

Disaster Relief

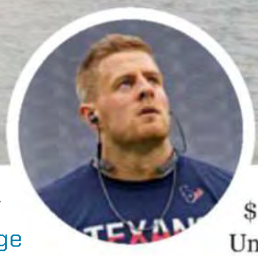
Football responds to Hurricane Harvey

WATCHING THE AFTERMATH of Hurricane Harvey, the devastating storm that hit the Texas Gulf Coast last Friday, bringing catastrophic flooding to Houston—the country's fourth-largest city—Texans defensive end J.J. Watt became so distraught that he took to social media and made a plea to his 6.6 million Twitter and Instagram followers. Setting up a fund-raising page, the 28-year-old Watt jump-started the fund by donating $100,000 himself. In a little more than 24 hours, his Houston Flood Relief Fund had raised more than $625,000. Watt set a goal for the fund of $1 million.

Others around the NFL followed suit. On Monday, the Texans pledged $1 million to the United Way of Greater Houston's flood relief fund, a donation that was matched by the NFL Foundation.

The Cowboys, who allowed the Texans to practice at their facility this week, sponsored a Dallas-area telethon to help raise money for recovery efforts. Patriots owner Robert Kraft and his family donated to the American Red Cross for the Hurricane Harvey relief fund and pledged to match all contributions, up to $1 million. Kraft has a great fondness for the city, he says; New England twice won Super Bowls there, in 2004 and '17.

To donate, go to **redcross.org** or **youcaring.com/JJWatt**



SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY Seeing the damage in Houston, Watt (inset) mobilized his fans and started a relief fund.

MEDIA

MIKED VICK

The scorned QB gets a desk job

IN THE OLD DAYS, there was the talk-show apology tour, a trip to Oprah's couch or to *The Tonight Show*. Then came the reality era, with fare like *Dancing with the Stars* geared toward rehabbing reputations through rumba. These days, it seems that if you are looking to change your image with the public, grab a mike and take a seat at the analysts' desk on Fox's FS1.

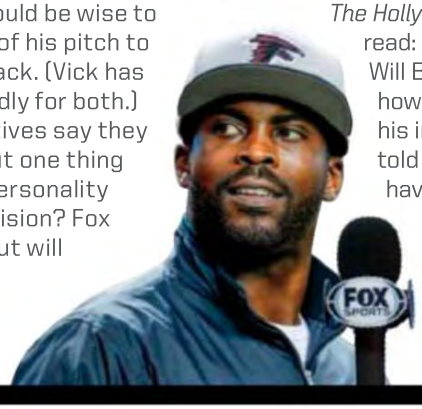
Last week the network added a resident to its sports rehab house, announcing it had hired former NFL quarterback Michael Vick as an analyst. Vick has long been a fascinating subject as an athlete, but he is also a polarizing figure: He was jailed for 19 months in 2007 for his involvement in a dogfighting ring and recently suggested on FS1 that Colin Kaepernick would be wise to cut his hair as part of his pitch to work as a quarterback. (Vick has apologized repeatedly for both.)

Television executives say they generally care about one thing above all: Will the personality be compelling television? Fox believes Vick will. But will the public agree?

Of course, no athlete has used TV better than Alex Rodriguez. Suspended for the entire 2014 MLB season for using performance-enhancing drugs, Rodriguez has been a revelation for Fox as an analyst. His reinvention has drawn plenty of interest in the media. Last month Rodriguez was on the cover of *The Hollywood Reporter*, which read: "The Redemption Will Be Televised." Asked how he was able to rehab his image, Rodriguez told *The Reporter*: "You have to own your s—."

It remains to be seen if that will be enough for the public to tune in to Vick.

—Richard Deitsch



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BLOWN COVER

ON JUNE 1, VIDEO GAME company 2K Sports revealed the cover for its upcoming *NBA 2K18*. The subject? Kyrie Irving. One problem: He's in a Cavaliers jersey, and his trade to the Celtics will likely be finalized by the time the game is released on Sept. 19. Cover subjects of video games have looked ill-timed before. Here are five other cringeworthy examples, and how they rate on the Irving Scale of Awkwardness (from 1 to 5).

RORY MCILROY PGA TOUR • ATHLETE: RORY MCILROY
The world's No. 1 player and the reigning British Open champ graced the cover of a game released two days before the start of the 2015 British. But McIlroy withdrew from the tournament with an ankle injury, lost his top ranking by September and hasn't won a major since.

MLB 12: THE SHOW • ATHLETE: ADRIÁN GONZÁLEZ, RED SOX
Sony named González, coming off an All-Star and Gold Glove season in Boston, to be the cover boy. But when the Red Sox tanked in 2012, González was a goner, traded to the Dodgers in August.

MADDEN 09 • ATHLETE: BRETT FAVRE, PACKERS
The Packers' legend was given something of a lifetime achievement honor by being selected for the cover in a Green Bay jersey before the 2008 season. But Favre elected to come out of retirement in August and play for the Jets, and by '09 he was a Viking.

NBA LIVE 08 • ATHLETE: GILBERT ARENAS, WIZARDS
Washington's guard was already suffering from a meniscus injury when he was picked to be the featured star. He played just 13 games in 2007-08 and only two in the season after that.

NHL 2005 • ATHLETE: MARKUS NASLUND, CANUCKS
After a fine 2003-04, Naslund was primed to justify his cover selection for '04-05 . . . if only there had been an '04-05 season. A lockout canceled the entire season, making the video game the best way fans could experience the NHL that year.

SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

The Jets on Monday signed a safety with a hell of a name: **Armagedon Draughn.**

Jordan Burroughs
Behind his fourth individual title, the U.S. wrestling team won gold at worlds for the first time since 1995.

HOT

NOT

Julian Edelman
The Patriots' receiver will miss 2017 with a torn ACL. Status of his Bae-CL? Still intact.

THEY SAID IT

Obituary for Jeffrey Riegel
Loyal Eagles fan from Port Republic, N.J., who died Aug. 18 at age 56, relaying his final wishes.

"[JEFFREY] REQUESTED TO HAVE EIGHT PHILADELPHIA EAGLES AS PALLBEARERS, **SO THE EAGLES CAN LET HIM DOWN ONE LAST TIME.**"

TWITTER (NBA 2K18); EA SPORTS (4); SONY (MLB 12: THE SHOW); MICHAEL J. LE BRECHT II/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (IRVING); YUJI SAKAI/GETTY IMAGES (APOCALYPSE FIRE); RONALD C. MODRA/SPORTS IMAGERY/GETTY IMAGES (APOCALYPSE HELMET); MUSTAFA YALCIN/ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES (BURROUGHS); GREG NELSON (EDELMAN); MICHAEL J. LE BRECHT II (EAGLE CARSON WENTZ)

Life gets plain if you don't add flavor.

Life's tasty. Crunch on.

BULLRIDING

DOWNWARD-FACING BULL

Yoga comes to the PBR

AFTER FEEDING THE 20 or so roping calves and cows on a 200-acre ranch in Bowie, Texas, Jess Lockwood often has some free time. The 19-year-old star on the Professional Bull Riders tour spends several weeks a year at the ranch owned by Cody Lambert, the director of livestock for the PBR and a former pro rider himself. There's a little more downtime here than there is at the Lockwood family's 10,000-acre, 450-cattle farm in Volborg, Mont., giving Jess the chance to hop in his Buick Regal and drive one hour south to Fort Worth for his secret weapon: hot yoga.

"We get tossed and thrown on the bull," says the 5' 5", 130-pound Lockwood. "It's tough on us. We have to be flexible. Yoga helps so much. Heck, it's hot in that room. It'll help get you flexible and sweat out toxins."

The 2016 PBR rookie of the year, Lockwood does yoga for an hour every day when he's staying in Texas. The key to a successful bullrider, he says, is being lean but strong, and yoga helps him do both.

Lockwood got into doing hot yoga in May, when he and some fellow riders went to IMG Academy in Bradenton, Fla., for a weeklong exercise retreat. "From a flexibility standpoint, being able to move your body in certain positions can really help them," says Taryn Morgan, the assistant director of athletic and personal development at IMG. "On the bull, they get in some interesting positions. Yoga also decreases injury risk."

Lockwood prefers hot yoga because he likes to sweat, and he likes bullriding because "I grew up in it." His dad, Ed, rode saddle broncs; his mom, Angie, was a barrel racer; and his aunt Lisa Lockhart is a 10-time qualifier in barrel racing at the National Finals Rodeo. Jess started riding calves when he was three or four years old. "I thought it was the coolest deal ever," he says.

Currently ranked third on the circuit out of 186 riders, Lockwood has won four of his 34 events this year and finished in the top five 12 times. He was also named to the U.S. team that will compete at the five-nation PBR Global Cup in Edmonton in November.

While his bullriding doesn't leave a lot of time for Pranayama—"If you have time to think on the bull, you're probably getting thrown off"—yoga does help Lockwood relax before races and build his confidence.

"There's only about 10 guys who do yoga," he says. "You just feel good. It gives you an edge."

—Jeremy Fuchs

EDGE

Presented by edge

IMG yoga instructor Ashley Stewart offers three poses to improve anyone's flexibility (including bullriders).

CHILD'S POSE

On hands and knees, stretch your knees out wide so you can sit down on your heels. Hold for a few breaths.

FROG POSE

On all fours, spread knees apart and stretch your head forward to elongate your spine. Keep elbows right below your shoulder.

PIGEON POSE

On all fours, bring left knee bended to left wrist. Slide right leg toward back of yoga mat and lay torso over the left leg.

For more athlete training profiles and tips, go to *SI.com/trainingwith*

EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES (LOCKWOOD); ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARTIN LAKSMAN

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+TAILGATE

SHELL GAME

Roll into fall with a sumptuous seafood spread

THE NFL SEASON kicks off on Sept. 7 in Foxborough, Mass., and the 8:30 p.m. start of the game between the Chiefs and the Patriots means that the official NFL tailgating season will begin that afternoon. What should football fans cook if they're attending the game or simply want to celebrate the return of pro football with a touch of New England fare? Chef Tiffani Faison, who has lived in the Boston area since 2004, suggests her lobster tacos.

"It has all those chowdery flavors," she says, "and it's reminiscent of the area. It's like a clam bake in a taco shell." Faison, who made the dish for a Pats game last year—it was quickly cleaned out—especially likes it for tailgates because most of the ingredients can be prepared in advance, then warmed on the grill. And it's flexible. "If you prefer crab or oysters instead of lobster, you can just switch those out," she says.

Faison, a sports fan who runs two restaurants in the shadow of Fenway Park, thinks the seafood dish is perfect for the season when baseball and football overlap. "It's a nice way to bridge the end of summer into fall," she says.

INGREDIENTS

LOBSTER TACOS
(SERVES 2)

- 4 flour tortillas
- 1½ pounds of lobster
- ¼ cup butter
- 1 cup fresh corn kernels
- ¼ pound Mexican hard chorizo, minced
- 2 tablespoons minced chives
- ¼ cup minced shallots
- ⅓ cup Kewpie mayo
- 1 tablespoon Old Bay seasoning

1 BOIL THE LOBSTER
Bring one gallon of salted water to a boil. Cook the lobster for about six minutes, then shock it in ice water. Remove meat from the shell, chop it into bite-sized pieces and set aside.

2 FLAVOR THE MAYO
In a small bowl, mix the mayo and the Old Bay. Set aside.

3 COOK THE CHORIZO
Render the meat in a sauté pan on medium heat until crispy, then remove from the pan. Add the corn kernels and the shallots, and cook in the chorizo fat for two minutes. Remove from the heat and add chives. (All previous steps can be done in advance.)

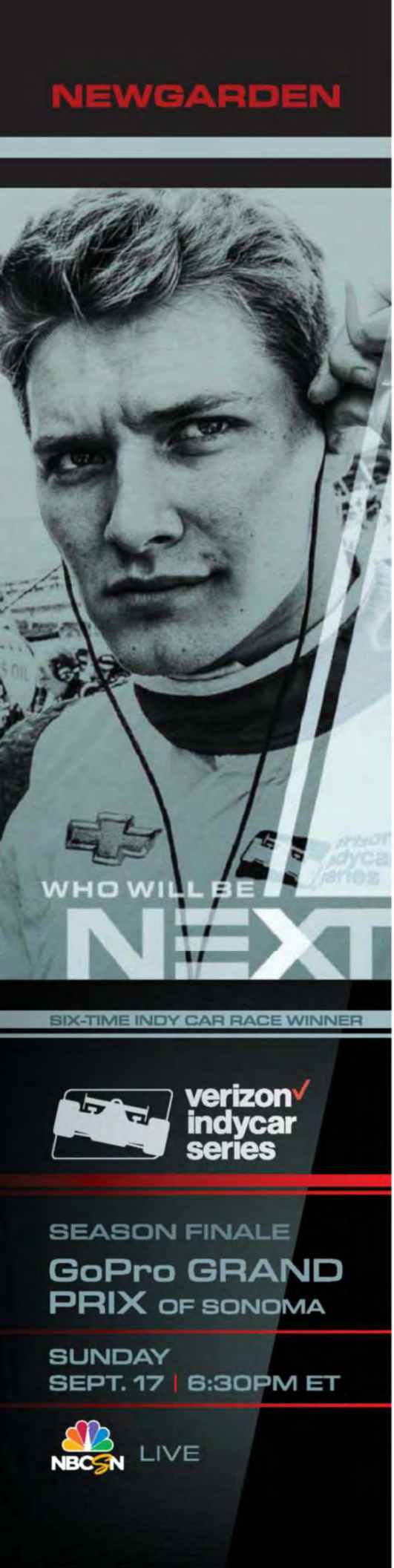
4 HEAT THE LOBSTER
Brown the butter in a clean sauté pan. When the butter is foamy, add the lobster and cook for two minutes.

5 ASSEMBLE THE TACO
Warm the tortillas, put the desired amount of mayo in the bottom of the tortilla, add the lobster meat and top with the corn mixture. Enjoy with a cold beer.

Tiffani Faison is the chef/owner of Sweet Cheeks Q and Tiger Mama. She was runner-up on the first season of Top Chef, *and she's a guest judge on this season's* Chopped Grill Masters.

MIKE DISKIN (TACOS); DAN WATKINS (FAISON)

PASS THE HEINZ.



SCORECARD

Ariel Okorie | *Waynesville, Mo.* | *Track and Field*

Okorie, a rising sophomore at Kansas State, won the heptathlon at the USA junior championships in Sacramento in June, scoring 5,266 points, 117 points over the runner-up. She also came in third at the Big 12 championships (5,251 points) and finished second at the Pan American junior championships in Trujillo, Peru (5,253).

Seth Torman | *Pelham, Ala.* | *Soccer*

Seth, a recent graduate of Pelham High, made six saves in a 2–0 win over defending Class 6A champion Cullman to lead the Panthers to their first state title. It was his fourth shutout in five playoff games. During the season Seth went 22-5-1 with 11 shutouts and had 134 saves while giving up just 11 goals. He will compete at UAB.

Conor Donadio | *New Milford, Conn.* | *Rowing*

Conor, a recent grad of New Milford High, won the men's singles final at the youth nationals in Sarasota, Fla., finishing in 7:15.16. Last year Conor, along with partner Jeffrey Schlyer, took the double sculls title at junior world trials in West Windsor, N.J. At the 2016 world juniors in the Netherlands, he finished 23rd in double sculls.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by **JEREMY FUCHS**

Diane Friedman | *Lyndhurst, Ohio* | *Track and Field*

Friedman, a 96-year-old former office worker, broke the world record in the 100-meter dash for women ages 95 to 99, finishing in 30.18 at the Lake Erie Association USATF meet. She had set the mark a month earlier, turning in a 32.90 at the Cleveland Track Classic. Friedman also set the 200 record (1:12.99) at the Lake Erie meet.

Shayla Howell | *Belle Fourche, S.D.* | *Track and Field*

Shayla, a rising senior at Belle Fourche High, earned state titles in four events at the Class A track championships: the triple jump (39' 9¼"), the long jump (18' 5¾"), the 100-meter dash (12.33) and the 200 (25.62). She also won the second go-round pole bending at the South Dakota High School Rodeo Association finals, finishing in 20.986.

Nick Dunn | *Sunbury, Pa.* | *Baseball*

Dunn, a rising junior infielder at Maryland, was named co-MVP of the Cape Cod League playoffs after batting .306 with seven RBIs in nine games and leading Brewster past Bourne 2-1 in the championship series. This summer he hit .333 and was fourth best in the league, with 16 RBIs. For the Terps, Dunn batted .261 with five home runs and 32 RBIs.

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SCOTT WEAVER/K-STATE ATHLETICS (OKORIE); MARISSA TINDEL (TORMAN); USROWING (DONADIO); BRUCE SHERMAN (FRIEDMAN); LIFETOUCH (HOWELL); GREG FUME (DUNN)

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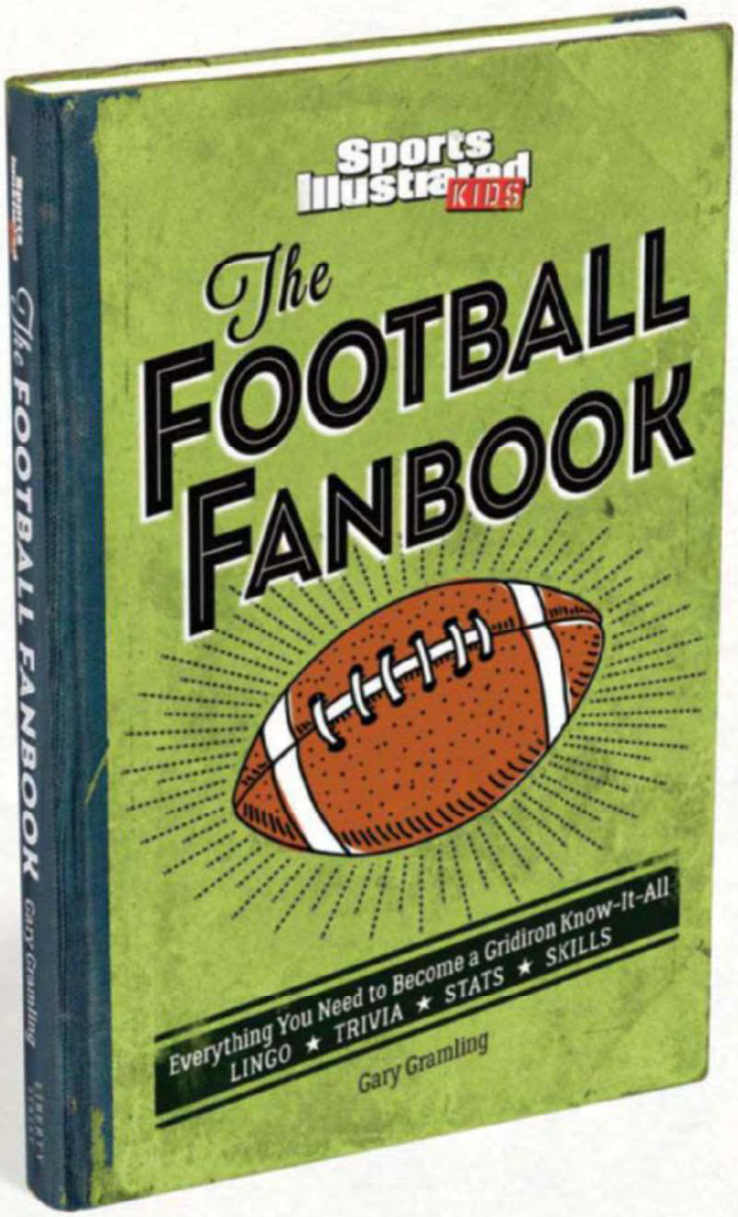
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The Case for . . .

GIANCARLO STANTON

BY JACK DICKEY

THE SEASON'S LAST month, playoff races aside, is for following the pursuit of records and milestones. The Dodgers—have you heard?—are chasing the mark of 116 wins, held by the 2001 Mariners and the 1906 Cubs. With 91 at week's end they could very well beat it, needing to go 26–7 the rest of the way.

And if we're looking for a genuine chase for a genuinely remarkable individual accomplishment, our eyes must turn where they rarely do in September: to Miami, where Marlins outfielder Giancarlo Stanton is bidding to become just the sixth different player to hit 60 home runs in a season.

He has a real shot. Through Sunday the 27-year-old Stanton had swatted 50, one every 9.5 at bats. He has averaged 3.7 at bats in Miami's first 129 games. Assuming he stays healthy and won't sit the rest of the way—not only is he chasing 60, but the Marlins are also chasing a wild-card spot, just 4½ games out—Stanton stands to get about 122 more at bats. At his current pace that's 13 additional homers, or 63 total.

Many hitters on quests similar to Stanton's have slowed down in September. For instance, in 2006 the Phillies' Ryan Howard crushed 14 homers in August and entered September with 49. But he hit just nine more, in part because he was walked about twice as often as usual in September. Stanton, though, should see plenty of pitches to hit: Eighteen of Miami's remaining 33 games come against also-rans. And if you're worried about fatigue: Have you seen Giancarlo Stanton?

Besides, sometimes when a great player is pursuing a record, you get historic outcomes. In 1927, when he became the first man to hit 60, Babe Ruth slugged 17 homers in September, a record for that month that stands 90 years later.

Sixty homers? Some quest, fans of a certain age may huff. They saw so many 60-homer seasons (six) from 1998 through 2001 that the feat seems about as exciting as a Marlins game was in those years. And given how fans view the men who authored those seasons—Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa and Barry Bonds—the quest has been diminished by their association.

But we do now have the benefit of distance from those ignominious days, and in the 15 full seasons since Bonds set the current record of 73, no one has gotten to 60. Baseball is again ready for a proper bid at that milestone, for the live look-ins and the nightly nerves. Stanton is the man to do it.

As eager as we are for another player to hit 60 or even 61—the standard set in 1961 by Roger Maris—I preemptively shudder at the discussion of who, exactly, is the "legitimate single-season home run king" that will ensue should Stanton pass Maris but fall short of Bonds. It's not fair to Stanton or, for that matter, to the complex history of the game during the Steroid Era, to stick him in a morality play. The best power hitter of the decade is smacking dingers as he never has before. That on its own is worth celebrating. □

Assuming he stays healthy and won't sit the rest of the way, Stanton stands to get about 122 more at bats. At his current pace that's 13 additional homers, or 63 total.

GONE-CARLO

50
Home runs for Stanton, through Sunday

9
Times a player, including Stanton, has entered September with 50

8
60-home-run seasons in MLB history

ERIC ESPADA/GETTY IMAGES

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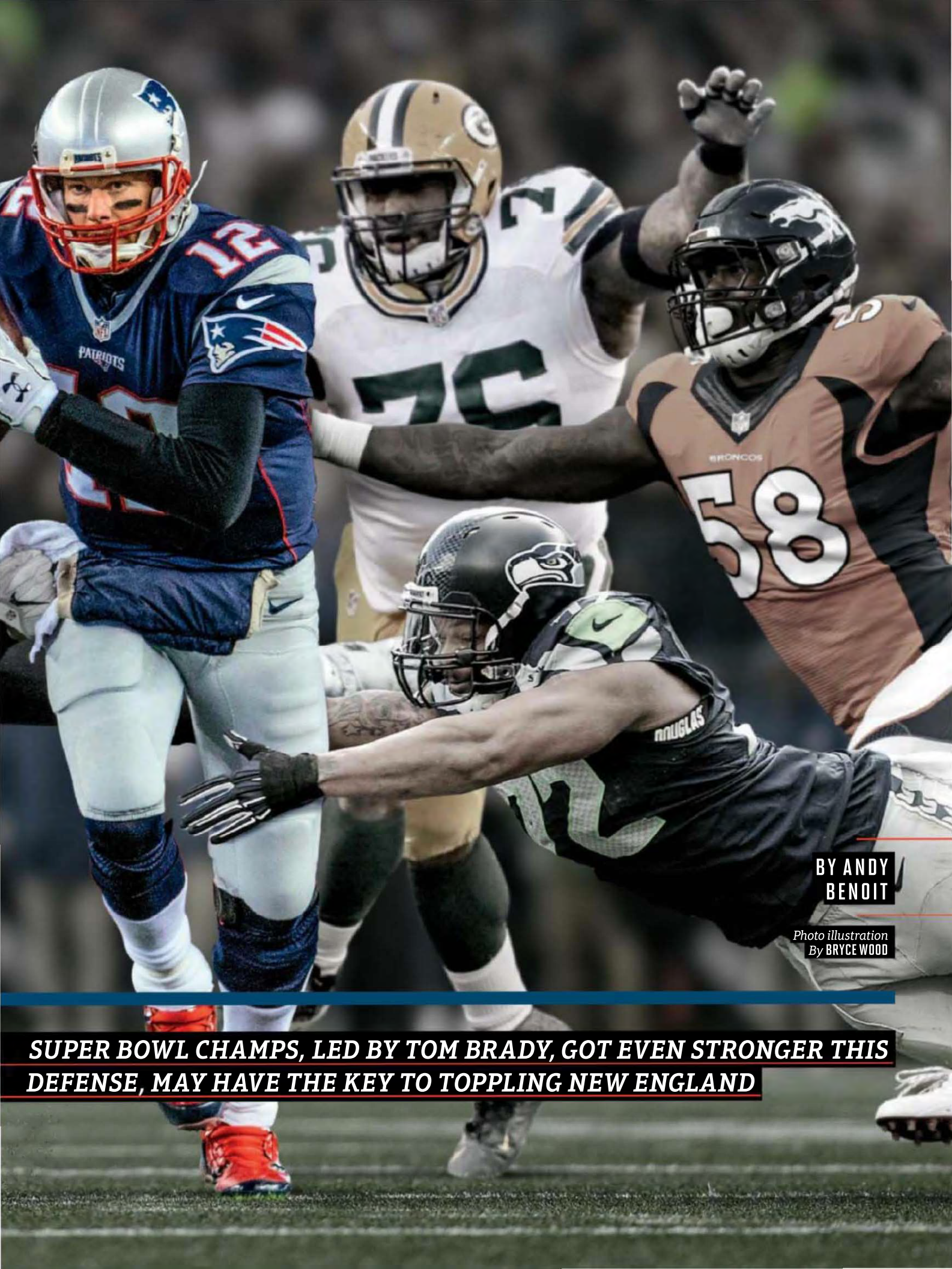
THE PATRIOTS PROBLEM

*THE 31 TEAMS NOT BASED IN FOXBOROUGH FACE A DILEMMA: THE OFFSEASON. BUT **THE TEXANS**, WITH THEIR FIVE-ACROSS DIAMOND*



BY ANDY BENOIT

Photo illustration By BRYCE WOOD

SUPER BOWL CHAMPS, LED BY TOM BRADY, GOT EVEN STRONGER THIS DEFENSE, MAY HAVE THE KEY TO TOPPLING NEW ENGLAND

"AFTER THAT NIGHT, WE KNEW..."

DIAMOND DOGS Houston's harassment of Brady (here being buried by Cushing) came down largely to the deployment of a five-man front on passing downs.

begins Texans outside linebacker Whitney Mercilus. He pauses to search for the right words. "We knew we were *better*."

Mercilus makes this assessment from his team's training camp at the Greenbrier resort in West Virginia, surrounded by densely forested hills, 58 miles from the nearest Starbucks. He's talking about last season's divisional-round playoff game between Houston and New England, and he's comparing his defense to the Patriots' offense. "We could've done a lot more than we did that night," Mercilus says.

Scary thought. The Texans' defense, which in 2016 ranked No. 1 in terms of yards allowed (301.3 per game), went into Foxborough in January and gave Tom Brady & Co. fits. A few uncharacteristic, out-of-structure downfield completions ultimately left Brady with a respectable 287 yards passing and propelled the eventual Super Bowl LI winners to a 34–16 victory—but the score had been surprisingly closer, 24–16, early in the fourth quarter when Houston quarterback Brock Osweiler threw the second of three interceptions that eventually cost his team the game. Brady dropped back 40 times that night and connected on only 18 passes, his worst completion percentage (47.4%) in 34 career playoffs games. Afterward, Patriots coach Bill Belichick warned, "We have to play better, we have to coach better . . . or there won't be much left in our season."

Privately other coaches around the league would later say that they were surprised how poorly New England handled Houston's pass-rush scheme that evening. A telling snapshot came at 6:06 in the second quarter, when the Patriots faced third-and-six from the Texans' 33-yard line. Brady was in shotgun. Opposite him, five Houston defenders lined up along the line of scrimmage. On the edges, outside of each offensive tackle (in a wide-9 position), were linebackers Brian Cushing and Benardrick McKinney. In the B gaps, between New England's guards and tackles (in a 3 technique), were defensive linemen Jadeveon Clowney and Antonio Smith. Mercilus stood directly over center David Andrews.

At the snap, only Clowney, Smith and Mercilus rushed; Cushing and McKinney dropped into shallow coverage. The QB now had eight pass defenders to sort through. But before Brady could get into his progressions he was engulfed by Mercilus, who'd easily spun past Andrews, an undrafted second-year center with middling size. The Texans had dropped into their "max" coverage, and still they got a premier pass rusher one-on-one against an overmatched lineman. They'd done the same

THIS PAGE: ROB TRINGALI. OPENING SPREAD (FROM LEFT) DAVID E. KLUTHO (BERRY); DAMIAN STROHMEYER/AP (MERCILUS, BRADY); JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES (DANIELS); SCOTT CUNNINGHAM/GETTY IMAGES (BENNETT); GREG TROT/AP (MILLER)

thing earlier in the game, when Mercilus's pressure had created a sack for Cushing.

Brady's long evening—18 pressures, eight hits, two sacks—and the Texans' near upset all stemmed from Houston's relentless use of a five-man front, creating a quintet of intriguing one-on-one matchups with the offensive linemen. It's a concept that defenses have long used in running situations but that has only recently evolved into a prominent passing down tactic. "That front allows me to use my ability against a lesser athlete than myself," says Mercilus, who since being drafted in the first round out of Illinois in 2012 has grown into one of the league's most versatile pass rushers. "There are athletic offensive linemen out there, but if you match them up with somebody who's quicker and smaller, that's where you change the game. And that's what we are, a matchup defense."

Therein lies the beauty of the five-man front, which Houston has come to call the "diamond": Not only did the Texans force the Patriots to pass-block one-on-one, they also got to *dictate* those matchups.

Ultimately, Mercilus's sack was just one moment; it had little bearing on the 2016 season. The Texans still watched Super Bowl LI as spectators. But the ingredients of that play—and many others like it that evening—hint at a recipe for upending the reigning champions. J.J. Watt is back on the field after a back injury landed him on IR last September. Clowney continues to blossom. Mercilus is in his prime. The diamond front, specifically in Houston, represents the NFL's best chance of dethroning Brady and the Patriots.

How to Beat THE PATS

. . . O.K., YOU CAN STOP LAUGHING NOW. WHAT FOLLOWS IS ADVICE FROM OPPONENTS WHO'VE BEEN TO BATTLE WITH THE PATRIOTS AND HAVE A FEW THINGS TO SAY ABOUT SURVIVING

Against New England's Offense . . .

ERIC WEDDLE Ravens FS Look at the times Brady has had not-so-stellar games—those have been when he's hit. Mix up your coverages, be confident, be able to match up when you play man or combo coverages. If you don't have the guys to do that, it'll be a long day.

KAWANN SHORT Panthers DT You've got to rattle Tom. Hit him every play; get that man out of his comfort zone. He's dangerous in the pocket; get him running. The defensive tackle, along with the defensive end, we have to stay outside and rush the pocket. And the guys inside have to get the pocket moving.

STEVE MCLENDON Jets DT Anytime you get a chance, *hit* him. Put your body on him. Be physical.

OLIVIER VERNON Giants DE . . . Then get your hands up and pray he misses his target.

LORENZO ALEXANDER Bills LB Give him multiple looks. Make things look the same, but they're really different—and then make things look different, but they're really the same. Throw him off, make him check to [some scheme] you'd rather be playing against.

DENNIS THURMAN Former Jets and Bills DC The thing they do better than anybody: They get in an empty set and [Brady] sees which matchup he likes. It's like schoolyard ball: *That guy can't guard that guy; I'm going to throw him the ball.* Every call you have on D, you have to have an empty adjustment for that, or they will destroy you. . . . If you have a look Brady thinks he knows, and it's *not* what he thought, you may make him pump the ball—and now maybe you have a chance to get some pressure on him.

TERRELL SUGGS Ravens OLB You have to cut the head off the snake—number 12—because he's not going to make a mistake. You can't play him like a normal QB. If you're looking at him, your guy is probably scoring. Keep your eyes on your luggage—your man—and be fundamentally sound.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARTIN LAKSMAN

WITH THE recent rise in spread offenses, the NFL has become such a pass-happy league that a D's only hope is to go on the offensive. "Defenses are becoming just as multiple [or flexible in their arrangement] as offenses," says Texans coach Bill O'Brien. "Especially on third down."

For the past two decades, a double-A-gap front—four down D-linemen, plus two additional defenders over the center, one on each shoulder, creating a six-man front against five O-linemen—has been the go-to pressure look for NFL defenses. Longtime Eagles coordinator Jim Johnson introduced the concept, Mike Zimmer (now in Minnesota) perfected it, and you still see it used regularly, including in Houston. But the diamond front is quietly becoming the pressure look of choice for teams that have the personnel to execute it. With some regularity, the Broncos, Lions, Panthers, Patriots, Rams, Saints, Steelers and Vikings used diamond fronts in passing situations last season, while several other teams dabbled in the tactic. No defense, however, employs the front more frequently or more effectively than the Texans.

In order to succeed, a diamond front requires a single pass rusher who can't be blocked one-on-one. In Watt, Clowney and Mercilus, the Texans have three. "We have a lot of talented guys," says the most talented of all, Watt. "The ability to put different pieces in different places gives you a lot of multiplicity up front. [You can] wreak havoc that way."

On the surface, this all sounds simple. *Five defenders across from five blockers? Most offensive players have seen this since peewee football.* But the diamond's real complexity shows in passing situations, when those five players start running stunts—or what Mercilus refers to as "games." At the snap, a given defender might attack a blocker's shoulder or try to cross over a blocker's face, creating a lane for another defender to loop in and attack. "We practice those games every single day," says Mercilus, "so we get the timing down, the rhythm down."

Those games can put tremendous stress on an offensive line. On any given play against a healthy Texans team, for example, at least three offensive linemen are led to believe presnap that they're about to block an elite pass rusher. But that pass rusher may relocate at the snap, with a whole new defender appearing. Imagine gearing up to block Clowney—possessor of one of the league's most explosive and powerful initial bursts—and then seeing him leave . . . only to realize you're now blocking Watt, the most destructive defensive force of this era.

Even if every blocker recognizes a stunt correctly, blocks must still be executed, often against defenders rushing from unusual angles. And when 300-pound offensive linemen are forced to move their feet and turn their hips, bad things can happen.

"It all comes down to how comfortable we are with each other, having that communication, whether it's verbal or nonverbal," says Watt, who's entering his fourth year playing with Clowney and Mercilus. "Being able to communicate with each other and really having a great feel for what each of us likes. . . ." Watt says this with the stoicism of an Easter Island statue; he's notoriously protective of trade secrets and he's not about to compromise his chances of beating the Patriots. "You're asking for the playbook, man," he says. "I'm not going to give it up."

How to Beat THE PATS

Against New England's Defense . . .

ELI MANNING Giants QB You have to be very patient. They might give you the flats or checkdowns—you have to be willing to take those all day. Take the completions and just move four, five, six yards at a time.

ERIC DECKER Titans WR They don't give up a lot of big shots. They say, 'You've got to beat us.' That's when you need all 11 guys to function as one, to *drive* the field, to sustain. If you can hold on to the ball and get first downs, you're taking time away from their offense. That's a way to beat them.

RICHIE INCOGNITO Bills G I don't want to say they're vanilla, but what they do on tape is what you're going to get in the game. They're not going to come out with some exotic blitz, like [Vikings coach] Mike Zimmer. . . . And they're going to test your weakest player constantly.

BRANDON LAFELL Bengals WR Bill [Belichick] is going to find your strengths and take those away. Your No. 3 receiver had better be on his A game—you're going to have to beat them with him.

—Reporting by The MMQB staff

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SO WHERE did the diamond come from? "Buddy [Ryan] really popularized the five-down look in the early-, mid-'80s," says seven-time Super Bowl winner Bill Belichick, as good a source as you'll find on just about any defensive subject. "He played it a lot in his base defense. His thing was really to get Dan Hampton [with the Bears], and then Reggie White [with the Eagles] on the nose. So part of it was the [structure of having] five-down, but part of it was to take the best player he had and put him on the center."

Ryan applied the diamond concept more against the run than against the pass, as many teams still do. (It's a sibling of Ryan's famed "Bear front.") Where it's changing the game today is as a subpackage tactic in passing situations. "Back in [Ryan's] day, you didn't have the frequent substitutions we do now; for the most part, the same 11 guys were on the field on third down as on first down," says Belichick. "By the later '80s, there were more three-receiver sets [and thus] more nickel defenses.

"When I was with the Giants [in the 1980s] we ran five-man out of a 3–4 [defense]. When I went to Cleveland [in the early '90s] we played a four-man D-line in nickel schemes, but we built a package with a linebacker, Clay Matthews, over the center. We could stem in and out with the linebacker—we could be in five-down, then walk [Matthews] out and be in a 4–2, then back in a 5–1, then in a 4–2. . . ." In the passing game, "five-man changes a lot of protection rules, particularly for the back and the quarterback, especially if you have players on the line of scrimmage who can drop into coverage. If an offensive tackle goes out to block [one of those five players], but then the defender drops into coverage and you blitz up the middle, you create some mismatches."

Belichick would know; he still deploys diamond fronts in New England. He goes on, dissertating on five-man fronts against various concepts, reaching all the way to read-option offenses in college schemes—then he grinds to a halt. "I mean, we can talk about this all day," he says with a smile.

He refocuses. A big key to the diamond front is having coverage defenders begin a play up on the line. That's where much of the disguise lies. But also much of the risk.

"Instead of being in a 4–2 [alignment] you're in a 5–1, a one-linebacker defense," says Belichick. "That gives you fewer people behind the ball. So if you get split, there's only one guy playing the second level." A defense could "get split" by a running back who quickly breaks through the line of scrimmage. Or, in passing situations, by a scrambling quarterback. Or by a receiver on a short inside route. Anytime you take bodies from the linebacker level of the defense and put them up on the line of scrimmage, you become more vulnerable to a big play should a ballcarrier quickly or unexpectedly reach open space.

Of course, all defensive schemes have weaknesses. If there were one without a downside, every team would play that way every snap. As aggressive pressure packages go, though, a diamond front is relatively safe. In the popular double-A-gap front, for example, six defenders are up at the line. But it's rare that all six will rush—if they did, every defensive back would be isolated in single coverage—which means that double-A-gap concepts rely heavily on players being able to drop back into coverage. And that's not ideal.

"In zone coverage, [those guys] are covering from the line of scrimmage, trying to get back to an area and see guys behind them," Belichick explains. "That's all easier to do [if you're initially aligned] *off* the ball."

ERICK W. RASCO (2)

TEXAN TOAST
With Mercilus & Co. in pursuit last January, Brady was hurried into his worst completion percentage in 11 years. In Week 3 he'll have to deal with Watt, too.

SAYS O'BRIEN: "SOMETIMES, WE'RE GOING TO MAKE OUR CALL REGARDLESS OF WHAT THE OFFENSE IS. SOMETIMES OUR CALL IS BASED ON THE OFFENSE. IT'S ALL DICTATED BY, *HOW CAN WE PLAY THE FASTEST?*"

GEORGE BRIDGES/AP

With one fewer line-of-scrimmage player than in a double-A-gap front, a diamond defense is less reliant on backpedaling defenders. Executing a four-man rush out of diamond, for example, requires only one defender to drop, and that difference—one dropper instead of two—creates more flexibility in coverage. With two droppers, a defense is inclined to play zone; with just one dropper, man-to-man becomes more feasible. (In fact, Patriots receiver Julian Edelman says that "when I hear 'diamond' in the chatter at the line of scrimmage, it usually gives you an indicator that there's going to be some sort of man coverage. . . . Of course, when you publish this, defenses are probably going to change that.")

Because the Texans are so experienced and effective at playing two-high-safety matchup-zone coverages, a foundation under the O'Brien regime, they don't always feel compelled to play the man coverage that diamond allows—but it's an option. Whatever they land on—hybrid-man or zone—they're fond of eight-man coverages, like the one they used on Mercilus's postseason sack of Brady. Altogether, the Texans dropped two linemen back in coverage and rushed only three about 30% of the time they were in diamond last season. Dropping two defenders in this instance is less worrisome than out of a double-A-gap look because it creates an eight-man coverage instead of a standard seven-man coverage. Defenders have more help around them.

Which brings us back to the Patriots. Eight-man coverages are the best way to stymie offenses that "like to run a lot of man-coverage-beating [route concepts]," says 12th-year Texans cornerback Johnathan Joseph. *Offenses like New England's*. "It's hard for the quarterback to read through all those defenders," Joseph explains. The Texans showed a diamond front and dropped into eight-man coverage six times against New England in January. On those plays they sacked Brady twice and gave up just one completion, for seven yards.

Besides crowding the short area of the field, a defense that drops eight players into coverage also discourages the offense from cushioning its pass protection with extra blockers—a running back or tight end, or both. And when extra blockers *are* sought? Then the defense can end up with at least two men in coverage for every route-running receiver while a bunch of O-linemen are left blocking air. An offense can't sustain success this way.

Putting eight bodies in coverage also allows a

defense freedom in disguising its looks, and against the Patriots that's crucial. As one NFL defensive coordinator puts it, "You cannot let Brady get a beat on your coverages before the snap. He'll *kill* you. You have to change it up." Mercilus offers similar sentiments. "With somebody as smart as him, who knows the game inside and out . . . you're playing against his mind. He knows where the holes are."

New England works hard to make those defensive holes predictable—everything it does before the snap centers around unmasking the coverage. "We'll have a motion indicator," says Pats receiver Danny Amendola. "If you see a guy in motion and there's a defensive back running along with him, that's man coverage. If [there's no one] running with him, that's zone coverage." The Patriots can also unmask coverages by how they structure their formations. "We'll disperse guys in and out of the formation," Amendola goes on. "We just put a tight end or running back outside." He smiles. "Not to give away too much of our offense." (What Amendola is getting at: If Brady has a tight end or back out wide and there's a linebacker or safety across from him, it means that linebacker or safety *followed* him there, which tells the QB he's facing man coverage. If there's a cornerback across from that split-out tight end or back, it means that corner stayed home; it's zone.)

And so we're bound to see two chess matches unfolding when Houston and New England meet in Week 3 this season: the Texans dictating matchups with their five-man diamond front, and the Patriots dictating matchups with their receiver alignments. So who's really in charge?

"That's an interesting question," says O'Brien, "and I'm going to answer that out of both sides of my mouth. Sometimes, defensively, we're just going to put our personnel out there and make our call regardless of what the offense is. But sometimes our personnel and our call is based on the offense. It's all dictated by, *How can we play the fastest?*"

Last season Brady got rid of the ball in an average of 2.57 seconds, which ranked 16th out of the 39 QBs who attempted at least 130 passes. On Mercilus's sack it took the linebacker a hair over two seconds to reach Brady. This play is brought to O'Brien's attention.

"That's one of the things about this league," he says. "It's not only a chess match schematically; it's a chess match of evaluating personnel. How can we get our guy [lined up against] a weaker player? I think *that's* the ultimate chess match." □

I STARTED with this supposition about the current Super Bowl champions: The residents of six states love the New England Patriots . . . and anyone from the other 44 hates them.

But as I traveled the country this summer, from training camp to training camp, that notion wasn't exactly borne out. "Envy" is the word

BY PETER KING

Illustration by MARTIN LAKSMAN

HOSTILITY. BOREDOM. ENVY. ADMIRATION. FOOTBALL USA IS STILL FIGURING OUT HOW TO PROCESS THE POWER OF THE PATRIOTS

HATERS GONNA FLUCTUATE

used by former Bears receiver Tom Waddle, now a talk radio host in Chicago. John Canzano, an *Oregonian* columnist and radio host, describes cheering for the Patriots as "like rooting for U.S. Steel—they're not relatable to the average person." But admiration was a prevailing feeling too. In mid-August, with a horde of 1,500-odd

THIS IS HARDLY NEW, THE IDEA OF HATING OR ENVYING OR BEING SICK OF A WILDLY SUCCESSFUL TEAM. IN THE LATE '70S, THE COWBOYS WERE THE TEAM AMERICA WAS SEVERELY CONFLICTED ABOUT.

Patriots-apparel-clad fans lining the field during a practice against the Texans in West Virginia, Hall of Fame baseball manager Tony La Russa and former Indiana basketball coach Tom Crean stood with Bill Belichick in an end zone, mining the three-time NFL Coach of the Year for nuggets on sustained success.

And so I've come to believe that America's feelings about the Patriots have, in fact, evolved. Eight years ago—after three Super Bowl wins and one cheating scandal, Spygate, in 2007—Belichick & Co. seemed despised by a larger cross-section of fans than they are today. But the Pats have since been to four more Super Bowls and won two, each with incredibly poised play as the game hung in the balance. You can hate. You can be envious. You can be bored by the annual domination in one of the least competitive divisions in history. But, unless you feel the cheating scandals stain everything about their greatness, it's hard not to admire what they've done.

As I started to explore these emotions, I proposed a question on Twitter: *What best describes your feelings about the Patriots?*

- *Admiration*
- *Envy*
- *Hatred*
- *Boredom, bc they win 24/7*

In half a day I was avalanched with more than 16,800 responses, and the results surprised me: 46% chose admiration, 27% hatred, 14% envy and 13% boredom. Less than three in 10 football followers hate the Pats, according to this very unscientific poll.

My conclusion? Americans might truly dislike the Patriots, in many ways. We may not trust that every one of their victories this century has been won fairly. But there appears to be a growing (if grudging) respect for a team that has stayed on top for 17 years in this sporting society that chips away at greatness every day.

Landry Locker, a producer for SportsRadio 610 in Houston, told me he changed his opinion on Tom Brady and his brethren after their Super Bowl LI comeback last February, and after listening to Brady speak about his devotion to football. "Brady talks about football the way other people talk about their loved ones," Locker says. "How do you not respect a man who reveres the game the way he does?"

Let's say you hated Belichick after the Spygate scandal. New England, seemingly on the same strategic playing field as the other 31 teams from 2007 onward, won nine division titles in the last 10 seasons and reached four Super Bowls, winning two. Or say you hated the pretty-boy QB with the supermodel wife, and that you were further conflicted by his four-game suspension in '16 for allegedly tampering with game balls. But then you saw him orchestrate the greatest

JEFF HAYNES

comeback in NFL history, from down 28–3, to win Super Bowl LI. The Patriots, for a generation, have been metronomes of success. And many of those haters are turning into respecters.

A small but representative sampling of the diverse reactions to that Twitter poll:

"They are a misunderstood dynasty with a lot of haters," says Doug McCready, of Grand Rapids. "Belichick is a genius and Tom is the GOAT. How can you not love them?"

Daniel Carlton, of Oakland: "There is no rule or trend they have not dissected."

Ryan McCartney, of Pittsburgh: "I hate the Patriots. It's hard for me to admire what they have accomplished because of the controversy that has surrounded them. When the Patriots win, America loses."

Harold Drumheller, of Evington, Va.: "Love or loathe them, the Patriots have developed a great organizational model. Their consistency in the salary cap era has been unparalleled, and they continue to retool their product."

Bob Dahlstrom, of Willcox, Ariz.: "It irks me that an organization that has repeatedly been penalized by the commissioner keeps winning championships. It sends a worrisome message to the other 31 franchises."

J.P. Isabelle—a New Englander—of Barre, Vt.: "They hate us because they ain't us."

Greg Nallo, of Hudson, Ohio: "The thing that irks me most is they probably could have achieved all their success honestly, in which case I'd admire them. But they didn't."

Finally I asked Julian Edelman, hero of Super Bowl LI, about how his team is received. "Consistent winning," he says. "A lot of people don't like that."

THIS IS hardly new, the idea of hating or envying or being sick of a wildly successful NFL team. When I was in college, in the late '70s, the Cowboys were the team America was severely conflicted about. (Not too much has changed there.) I recently asked that team's architect, former vice president of scouting Gil Brandt, what percentage of people loved that old franchise and what percentage loathed it.

"I'd go around the country in those days, and I felt about 75% of the people loved us and 25% didn't like us," Brandt says.

Brandt may be erring on the side of reverence, but it's an interesting notion: 25% Cowboys hate,

ILLUSTRATION BY MARTIN LAKSMAN

PATFALLS

WILL NEW ENGLAND ACTUALLY LOSE FIVE GAMES? DOUBTFUL—THAT LAST HAPPENED IN 2009. BUT THERE ARE HURDLES IN '17. HERE ARE FIVE IMPEDIMENTS ON THE PATS' PATH TO PERFECTION (OR AT LEAST SUPER BOWL LII) —ANDY BENOIT

WEEK 2 at New Orleans Besides having a quarterback capable of hanging 35 points on anyone, New Orleans has a defense built on aggressive coverage rotations and disguises. The one thing you can't do is allow Tom Brady to figure out your intentions before the snap. The Saints won't.

WEEK 3 versus Houston If the Texans had a competent quarterback, they very well may have won that divisional-round game at Foxborough last January. Houston's defense outplayed New England's offense mainly by pressuring Brady out of five-man fronts *(page 32)* . . . and those five-man fronts now have J.J. Watt back.

WEEK 7 versus Atlanta Let's not forget: The Falcons blew out the Patriots for the first three quarters of Super Bowl LI with their collective speed. Things only changed when fatigue set in. If Atlanta's defense plays like it did in February and forces, say, even two more punts, they'll get revenge. [The Pats still keep their rings; sorry, Dan Quinn.]

WEEK 10 at Denver The best way to defend New England's passing game is with man coverage. Problem is, the Pats are great at defeating that man coverage with pick and rub routes and with presnap motions. No cornerback group is better at working through picks and rubs and against motion concepts than Denver's Aqib Talib, Chris Harris and Bradley Roby *(top)*.

WEEK 14 at Miami Second-year Dolphins coach Adam Gase has a good feel for attacking New England's defense. His quarterbacks have had hot streaks against their man coverage, and some of Miami's play designs have given the Pats problems, particularly with outside zone concepts. Sustained success there is important because it keeps Brady off the field—and that's *always* a good thing.

then, if he is correct; 27% Patriots hate now, if my Twitter poll is a remotely accurate measuring stick.

Beginning in 1970 the Cowboys reached the Super Bowl five times in a decade. They won two of those. Two of their three losses were to the dominant team of the decade, the Steelers, who had a quiet coach, Chuck Noll, under traditional and respectful owners, the Rooney family.

Dallas had an all-American coach, Tom Landry, and an all-American quarterback, Roger Staubach, who served four years in the Navy before embarking on a Hall of Fame career with the Cowboys—nobody could hate that gentlemanly duo. But they could hate Dallas's collective embracing of the "America's Team" nickname, especially when the Cowboys weren't the best team of their day. They could hate the oilman owner, Clint Murchison, who didn't care in the pre-salary-cap NFL how much money he threw at his franchise. ("[Tex Schramm] didn't have a budget for the team," says Brandt. "He had a forecast.") And they could hate the brash club president and showman, Schramm, for his braggadocio and his attempts to influence league policy through his tight relationship with commissioner Pete Rozelle. When I married a Pittsburgh gal in 1980, it meant marrying into a pro-Steeler, anti-Cowboy family. "Rozelle always favors the Cryboys!" my father-in-law would say. He loved calling them the Cryboys, believing as he did that Schramm would go bawling to Rozelle when his team didn't get its way on some league ruling.

"CONSISTENT WINNING," SAYS JULIAN EDELMAN, HERO OF SUPER BOWL LI. "A LOT OF PEOPLE DON'T LIKE THAT."

Says Brandt, "It was actually just the opposite: Pete bent over backwards to make sure no one could ever say [he favored us]. We had a terrible schedule at times—three in a row on the road, things like that. The bigger issue was that we had a pretty wealthy owner. We started pro days, for example. We would go to Ohio State in March and time their entire team [in the 40-yard dash]. Then we'd spend $600 of Clint's money on a big dinner to thank the coaches and their spouses. Clint didn't care, as long as it was helping us find players. But the rest of the league—and lots of fans—thought, *Those goddam Cowboys, out there spending money like that. It's not fair.*"

Where the envy and enmity inside the league reached a peak was in the Cowboys' pursuit of those college players around draft time. Brandt employed Murchison's money to maintain a crew of lawyers, car dealers, entrepreneurs and bankers who on draft day would fan out across the country, positioning themselves to sign unpicked players as free agents. "We'd have 55 or 60 guys signed before other teams really got started," says Brandt. "People inside the league didn't like us. It was envy, jealousy. We had what they didn't."

The Patriots, too, use their advantages to the max. They don't have Murchison's deep pockets, but they can use their standing as a constant Super Bowl contender to nab short-term free agents (Chris Long, Darrelle Revis) at team-friendly prices. They test the edges of the rule book (like the oddball formations that angered the Ravens in the 2014 playoffs), and it ticks off the rest of the league.

"WE WILL miss this era when it's over," says one of the responders to the Twitter poll, Alex Armstrong, of Washington, D.C. Seventeen years and running, no sign of 7–9. It's going to get interesting when Belichick ultimately decides that Brady, now 40, is declining. Will he jettison his starter for Jimmy Garoppolo, whom he loves and whom he kept this off-season instead of trading him away? Brady knows he's around only as long as he's at the top of his game. "I don't ever want to play for another coach, another owner," he told me earlier this year.

But what do we know? Belichick's probably going to find a way to keep this train moving. And that, at the very least, will keep us talking. □

KEVIN TERRELL/AP

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DAVID JOHNSON'S MUTANTLIKE SKILLS—ON FULL DISPLAY OVER TWO LIFE-ALTERING WEEKS LAST JANUARY—SPRING FROM HIS UNLIKELY PATH TO STARDOM

THE X-MAN FACTOR

BY GREG BISHOP

Photograph by
RALPH FRESO
GETTY IMAGES

THE STRETCH *started on New Year's Day, with Cardinals running back David Johnson galloping toward history in Los Angeles. He had already gained 1,233 rushing yards in 2016. Now he needed 159 receiving yards to become only the third player in NFL history to join the 1,000-1,000 club, a football society so exclusive that all of its members (Marshall Faulk, Roger Craig) could fit on a love seat.*

Over the first 14 days of 2017—Two Weeks in January—the story of the NFL's most unlikely superstar would take a series of strange turns. Johnson would frighten everyone he's closest to, affirm his status as a "mutant," throw his wife in a pool and, miles from the nearest football field, pray, Please, Lord, do not let me fumble here. *But as the defining fortnight began, Johnson ran onto the field against the Rams in Week 17.*

Jan. 1: *With 4:39 left in the first quarter, Johnson took a pitch left and darted smack into several big-bodied defenders. He tried to wrench away, his torso bent backward, but then Eu-*

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gene Sims, a hulking 269-pound defensive end, fell on Johnson's left knee, twisting it so badly that everyone watching grimaced at the sight.

Career ending? *wondered Johnson's coach, Bruce Arians.* His leg is broken, *Johnson's wife, Meghan, told herself as she turned away from the TV at home near Tempe, Ariz., sobbing as she faced the wall. She was eight months pregnant and home alone.* This is as heartbreaking as when quarterback Carson Palmer tore his ACL, *thought general manager Steve Keim.*

Up in the box, offensive coordinator Harold Goodwin weighed the situation: the 1,000-1,000 club and now the franchise back writhing on the ground. Screw history, *he thought.*

MONTHS AFTER his frenetic two weeks, Johnson sits at his kitchen table, 20 minutes from the Cardinals' headquarters in Tempe. His house resembles the running back who sleeps here: big but not fancy, and kept private. The blinds stay drawn, the groceries are delivered. The Johnsons like to watch movies and catch naps, and they don't know many of their neighbors. The family patriarch passes hours in the garage with the door closed, practicing table tennis with an automatic ball feeder. "I don't get out much," he admits.

It's not that David Johnson is reclusive. It's that he never expected to get *this much* attention, never imagined he'd vacation at Disney World and be treated like an attraction, never foresaw the crowds that wanted pictures in Hawaii, autographs in New York City.

As recently as March 2015, Johnson lived in a one-bedroom apartment near the Northern Iowa campus in Cedar Falls. He owned one of those 100-pound TVs, a foot deep. It was here that he met Meghan, at a house party for her 19th birthday,

"I WOULDN'T TRADE JOHNSON FOR ANYBODY," SAYS KEIM, THE CARDINALS' GENERAL MANAGER. BY THIS HE MEANS ANY PLAYER, AT ANY POSITION, IN THE ENTIRE LEAGUE.

and then continued his courtship in their health promotion class. His future wife knew nothing about football. She didn't even know he played.

"She didn't know Kurt Warner!" Johnson says.

"I know *Pop* Warner," Meghan jokes as her husband doubles over.

Three years after they met, the Cardinals would draft him in the third round. He would score so many touchdowns and break so many records in his rookie season that the comparisons would start shifting, from a faster Matt Forte to the next Barry Sanders to his generation's Marshall Faulk.

"Runningwise, he's a mix of all the greats," says Goodwin, the names of legendary runners spilling from his mouth: Adrian Peterson (for his power), Gale Sayers (grace), Sanders (elusiveness), Faulk (versatility). . . .

An ascent like Johnson's, from that cramped apartment to the precipice of top-shelf NFL stardom, "just doesn't happen anymore," says Palmer. But what's important about Johnson's story isn't the improbability of his rise—it's how that improbability shaped him, turning him into a versatile hybrid with an unusual combination of talents, a remarkably effective amalgam of receiver skills and running back size. Evidence? Johnson was Pro Football Focus's top-graded wideout in the 2016 regular season, even though he's not technically a receiver. He was also named first-team All-Pro by the Associated Press in a new category for hybrid players ("flex") that fits him like a tailored suit. "I wouldn't trade him for anybody," says Keim. By this he means any player, at any position, in the entire league.

HURTS SO GOOD

Less than two weeks after injuring his knee on Jan. 1 (right), David and Meghan endured an off-field scare, then welcomed their son, David Jr. (above right).

PAUL SPINELLI/AP (LEFT)

ROBERT BECK

Jan. 1: *Johnson was carted off the field in Los Angeles, and once he made it back into the locker room, he only wanted to call his wife. "She wouldn't listen to anybody besides me," he says. "She thinks [team officials] will try to sugarcoat it."*

Meghan had seen how Cardinals officials reacted on their sideline. Her mind raced as she waited for his phone call, frantically sending text messages. When Johnson finally reached Meghan, he told her, "Everything's fine," and at first she didn't believe him. But it was true.

Jan. 2: *An MRI confirmed the best-case scenario, revealing nothing more than an MCL sprain. The injury that appeared potentially career-ending didn't even require surgery. "I told you David Johnson is not normal," nosetackle Xavier Williams would later say of his college and pro teammate.*

"David Johnson is a mutant."

BEFORE ANYONE ever compared Johnson to a famous running back or to some member of the X-Men, he was known on the dodgeball court as Glue Hands. He played on a traveling team while growing up in Clinton, a small city of about 26,000 located on Iowa's eastern edge. Johnson had just showed up at the gym one day, marched over to the dodgeball coach, Nancy Witt, and asked to join a high school students' game.

First Witt explained her rules to him: They played dodgeball as God intended, which meant head shots were O.K., but crying most definitely was not. Johnson shrugged, showing no fear.

"He had moves like you wouldn't believe," says Witt. "Spidey-like senses. I saw him Odell-Beckham it so many times. They could *not* hit him. It was like trying to hold water in your hand." Johnson was in the fourth grade.

As he dodged, ducked, dipped and dived, he could forget about the worst parts of his childhood—the bully who stalked him throughout his neighborhood, the father who'd abandoned him, the single mother who struggled to raise her six children. Regina Johnson worked at various fast food restaurants around town, moving her family numerous times, sometimes for brief spells in cheap motels. She hadn't planned to have six kids; she'd been trying for her fourth when she gave birth to triplets. The middle one she named David.

Amid the tumult, Johnson did manage to find peace throughout his childhood. He spent summers working, detasseling corn in giant fields, buying homemade ice cream, cracking jokes about how his little town, with its processing plant, sometimes smelled like dog food. But to anyone who saw the bigger picture, Johnson resembled a duck swimming in a pond: For all the calm he projected, he was churning furiously below the surface. When David was in grade school, Regina was jailed for driving under the influence, so he moved in with an older sister until his mom was released. She quit drinking after that, Johnson says, but money was always tight. He needed an escape route.

He found it on the football field, where he liked to please his coaches and lose himself in contact. He was obstinate in just one respect: He only wanted to play running back like his idol, Cowboys legend Emmitt Smith.

Johnson made varsity as a sophomore at Clinton High, power-cleaned 315 pounds as a junior and scored 42 times as a senior. In basketball he harassed 7-footers, dunked on taller players (he's 6' 1") and held his own against future NBA guard Marcus Paige, who played at Linn-Mar High.

And yet Johnson's myriad athletic gifts—the very traits that made him special—made it difficult for recruiters to see him as a running back. Every prospective school, it seemed, fixated on what he could become. Some saw him as a defensive back, others as a linebacker. Iowa told him, "You shouldn't get your hopes up" about walking on. Iowa State sent a letter. It was addressed to David *Jacobson*.

Jan. 3–12: *Johnson woke up early most mornings and drove to the Cardinals' facility to rehab. He wore a brace on his left knee and strapped on a NormaTec*

THE GIFT OF GRAB Johnson, whose 80 catches in 2016 bested the leading wideout on 14 other teams, came within 121 receiving yards of joining the NFL's two-man 1,000-1,000 club.

recovery device to reduce soreness and boost circulation.

Meghan was due at the end of the month, so he declined his invitation to the Pro Bowl, feeling like Charlie passing up a trip to the Chocolate Factory. The Johnsons instead made plans to accommodate for David's injury when his wife gave birth: They moved a couch next to her hospital bed so he could prop his leg up, created space for the recovery machine and concocted a new exercise program so he could rehab in the cramped space. The only thing they hadn't decided on was the boy's name. They knew they wanted to keep it simple. But for this stretch, nothing came easy.

Meghan suffered through numerous pregnancy complications, including preeclampsia, a potentially serious blood-pressure disorder found in roughly 5% of U.S. women. By early January her feet were so swollen that they no longer fit in her shoes. David spent nights researching her symptoms on the Internet, and the worst case-scenarios (death, amputation) filled him with dread. He suddenly knew the anxiety Arians had experienced when Johnson wrenched his knee, only magnified many times over

AT NORTHERN IOWA, it would have been hard to see a future NFL star in a young man who spent his summers removing asbestos and working as a handyman. Johnson calls the first gig "the worst job I've ever had." On his first day, he watched a safety video that warned workers they might get cancer from the chemicals they handled. Still, he showed up every morning, donned a hazmat suit and mask, grabbed a scraper and waded into poorly ventilated, un-air-conditioned homes for $14 an hour. The heat inside those suits often topped 110° as he loaded up bucket after bucket with as much as 200 pounds of black sludge. Despite a diet that consisted almost entirely of Totino's pizza rolls and microwaved Hot Pockets, Johnson says he actually *lost* weight. (He laughs now at learning that many of his NFL teammates played for major programs that provided summer stipends.)

Another summer, Johnson earned $9 per hour cleaning campus toilets, installing blinds, repairing stoves and unclogging shower drains. That gig, he says, ever positive, was "the coolest."

Northern Iowa's coaches, meanwhile, didn't quite know what to make of the kid. They'd recruited Johnson as an athlete, and so they tried him at safety ("intercept another pass," offensive coordinator Bill Salmon warned at one practice, "and you'll never play offense again"), moved him to receiver and then toggled him between wideout and running back.

In the shuffle, Johnson—still a full-time running back at heart—learned how to run receiver routes, fool cornerbacks with feints and make precise cuts. Under strength coach Jed Smith, he improved his max squat from 470 pounds to 670, his snatch from 225 to 325 and his bench press from 275 to 435.

The receiver reps, plus the uptick in muscle mass, allowed Johnson to grow into his preferred position, like a point guard who sprouts eight inches and retains savage handles. Over the next four years he set UNI records for rushing yards (4,687), all-purpose yards (6,859) and touchdowns (64). He amassed 203 receiving yards against Iowa, the team that told him not to get his hopes up, and scored four times against Iowa State, the team that misspelled his name. Williams calls this "David doing David stuff."

As the draft approached, Johnson took a picture of one NFL.com scouting report and read it multiple times every day: "Lacks the short-area quickness to be consistently effective. . . . Isn't a classic finisher. . . ." When he arrived at the Senior Bowl, he encountered a Jaguars scout who couldn't find his name. "Do you play linebacker?" the scout asked. Johnson sighed. He still had more to prove.

Jan. 12: *The Johnsons limped and waddled to their white Chevy Tahoe and drove to the movies. They bought tickets to the animated Disney movie* Moana,

NORM HALL/GETTY IMAGES

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settling into the theater to watch "an adventurous teenager sail out on a daring mission," according to one synopsis. ("Don't judge me," Johnson will say later.)

As the credits rolled, Meghan stood up and her drink slipped from her hands, crashing to the floor, lemonade spilling everywhere. Her ankles were so swollen they wouldn't bend. Her feet looked like balloons. She couldn't walk. So Johnson followed the couple's midwife's instructions for a situation like this: He scooped up Meghan, hobbled to the car, drove her home, cranked up the temperature on their pool to 95° and tossed his wife into the water. He jumped in, too, and they remained there for two hours, waiting for the swelling to subside, floating on rubber noodles. It was crazy, they kept saying, how they'd gotten there, all they'd gone through, what was next.

In that moment, Johnson says he related to Moana, the eponymous Disney heroine. She had found her identity, as he had found his: elite NFL running back, slayer of defenses, breaker of tackles, doubted by none . . . and, soon, dad.

CARDINALS EXECUTIVES drooled when Ameer Abdullah dropped into the second round in the 2015 draft—that is, until the Lions snagged the Nebraska running back one pick before Arizona went on the clock. Instead, the Cardinals traded their pick and defaulted to selecting Johnson in the third.

Keim says he first knew he'd stumbled onto greatness when, a few months later in training camp, he saw Johnson take a toss sweep and accelerate into open space as if powered by twin jet engines. *A 224-pound human isn't supposed to move like that*, Keim thought. Johnson actually tweaked his left hamstring on that play, but even as Keim's new back lay on the field, he turned to the nearest scout and mouthed one word: *Wow.*

Not everyone was that impressed. Palmer, the QB, found Johnson too nonchalant at practice; at one point early on he even pleaded, "Man, are you *in* this?" It was that same remoteness, Palmer would learn, that had fooled scouts into thinking Johnson didn't run with enough fury. Arizona's gain.

If Johnson had found in Meghan his perfect match at home, he'd now found his football equivalent in Arians, his new coach. Whereas others noted Johnson's limitations—he was not seen as a smooth downhill runner, for example—Arians saw the promise of a versatile centerpiece to the league's most imaginative offense. The great backs Arians had previously worked with, from Edgerrin James to Chris Johnson, had been best used in certain types of plays. David Johnson, he found out, could execute *all* of them. And whereas many NFL teams were platooning at the running back position, Arians, as is his custom, turned the other way.

Healed from that early hamstring injury, Johnson scored on his very first regular-season offensive touch, turning a short pass in the 2015 season opener into a 55-yard score against the Saints. The next week, at Chicago, he returned the opening kickoff 108 yards and added a rushing score in the third quarter. The Pro Football Hall of Fame called afterward. They wanted his cleats.

En route to an NFC championship game appearance, Johnson became only the fourth rookie in NFL history to surpass 500 yards rushing, 400 receiving and 500 in kickoff returns, and to score at least 13 TDs—but still he continued to refine, learn, borrow. He watched tape of Steelers running back Le'Veon Bell and exhibited more patience; he amped up his physicality and started knocking linebackers flat; he continued to refine his receiver skills.

The Cardinals regressed in 2016—chalk up their 7-8-1 record to injuries that felled three

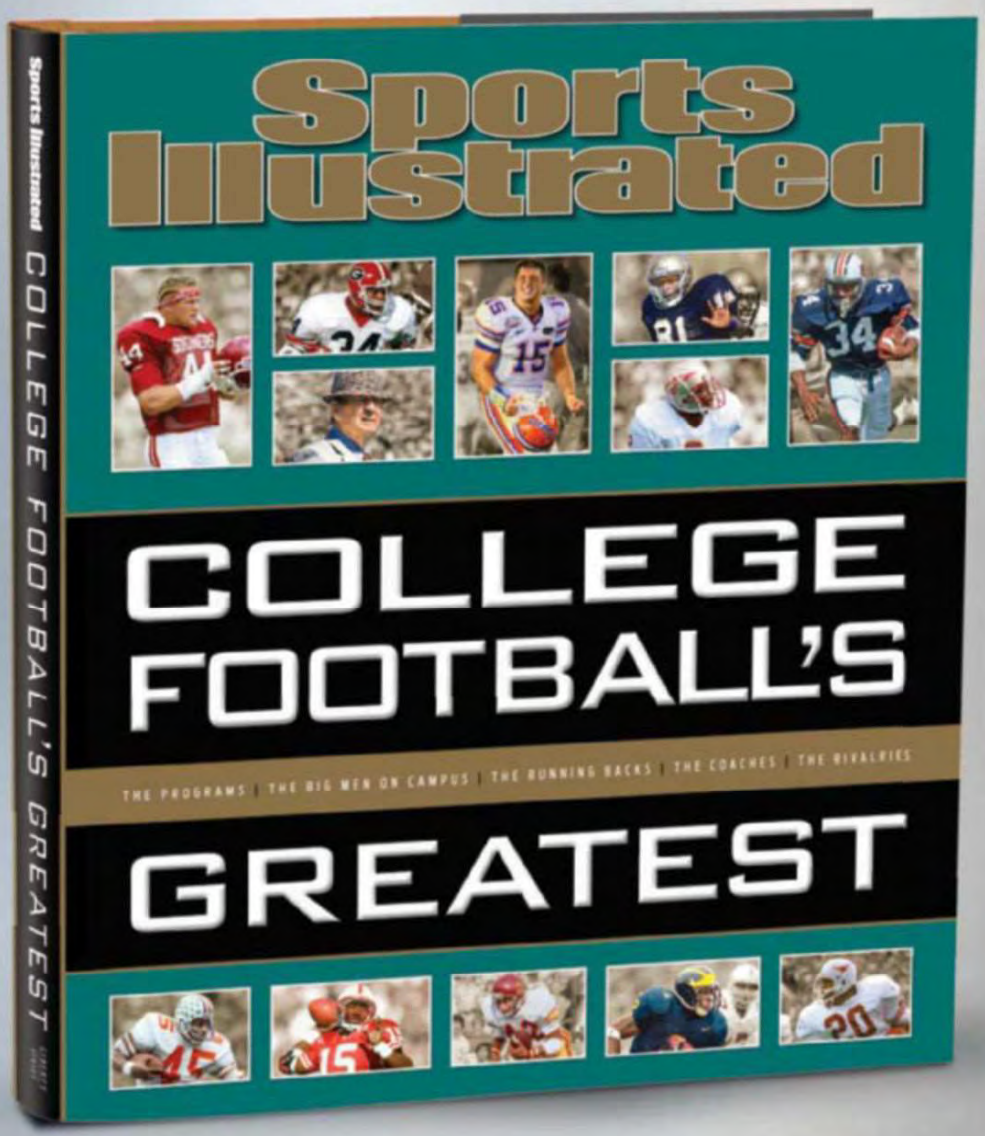
BACK OF THE FUTURE

Johnson averaged 77 rushing and 55 receiving yards last season, and Arians plans to build on that. The goal in 2017: 30 touches every game.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

THE BEST OF COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Who is the greatest running back of all time? How about the most brilliant coach? What was the best game ever? SI's team of experts once and for all settles the questions college football fans have been debating since the first kickoff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O-linemen, plus, according to Arians and Keim, a sense of "complacency" across the team—but still Johnson finished with an NFL-best 2,118 yards from scrimmage, 124 more than the Cowboys' Ezekiel Elliott and 234 more than Bell.

Stump Mitchell, Johnson's position coach last season (now in the same role with the Jets), says that "his best seasons are yet to come."

"Listen," he continues, "it's not far-fetched to think that David can be the best running back there is—or ever has been."

Jan. 13: *After the injury and the rehab and the pregnant pool party, the Johnsons drove to the nearest hospital on a Friday afternoon. Labor lasted for almost 24 hours.*
Jan. 14: *At 11:29 a.m., doctors let the running back with the receiver's résumé catch his son upon delivery. Johnson had never been so nervous as he was when he told himself,* Do not fumble this one.

After delivering a five-pound, eight-ounce baby boy into David's waiting hands, Meghan became light-headed and nearly fainted, so doctors placed her on bed rest. They worried the boy might have jaundice. Johnson then spent the next three days limping down the hospital's hallway every three hours to feed his son, whom they named David Johnson Jr. Don't mess this up, *he told himself.*

MEGHAN SEES THE REAL DAVID JOHNSON, AFTER HE WINS FANTASY GAMES. SHE KNOWS WHAT OTHERS MIGHT DOUBT: EVEN MUTANTS FEEL PAIN.

THE JOHNSONS are relaxing at home now, passing another overheated Arizona afternoon indoors. The boy known as D.J. to his parents is laughing and drooling and wiggling and admiring his reflection in the mirror. He sleeps these days in a bassinet that Palmer provided, and he can almost turn over on his side. He's teething, chewing on baby dumbbells, stuffed monkeys, books. He's already flown at least 10 times; he sat courtside at the NCAA basketball title game in Phoenix, watched the sunrise in Hawaii and attended Super Bowl week in Houston.

"World's strongest baby," Johnson says, pushing the dumbbell toward his son.

Meghan, meanwhile, would love if D.J. didn't follow his father's lead into football. "It would be nice if he did something a little less dangerous," she says, wistfully. "Maybe violin?"

She sees the real David Johnson after he wins fantasy games for owners who couldn't care less about his long-term health. She knows what others might doubt: Even mutants feel pain.

Johnson isn't worried, though. When Arians said in March that he plans to find his running back 30 touches a game this season, Johnson welcomed it. With a workload like that, and last year's averages, he would shatter the yards-from-scrimmage record (2,509) set by the Titans' Chris Johnson in 2009. And what of the Curse of 370, the idea that production usually plummets the year after reaching that number of carries?

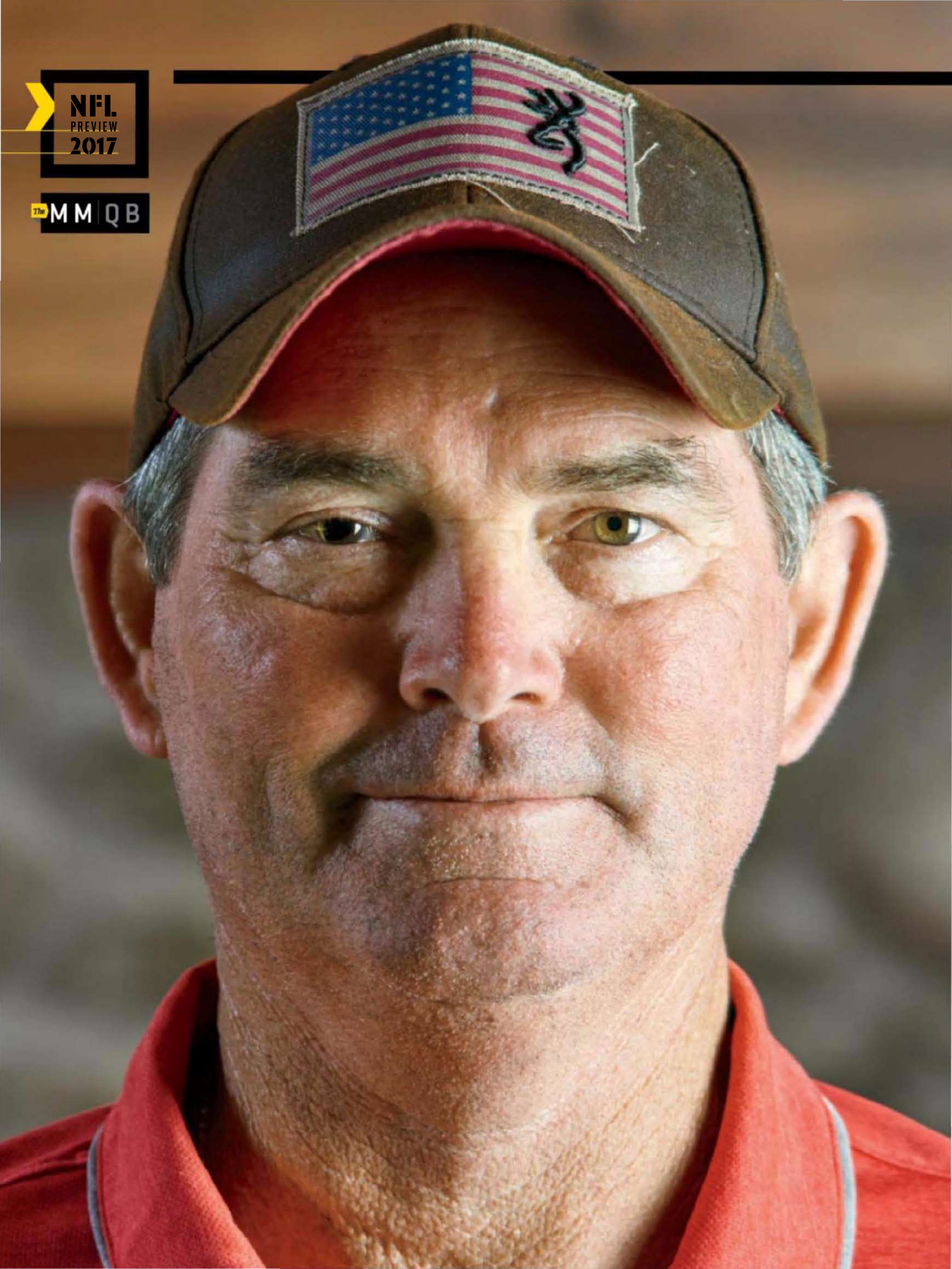
"He's not [just] *running* the ball 30 times," Arians scoffs, drawing a distinction between handoffs and catches out of the backfield, which typically end with less impactful tackles by smaller players. "Some people," says Arians, "don't know what the hell they're talking about."

Johnson cut fast food from his diet this offseason and added daily yoga to improve his flexibility, muscle symmetry and balance. He's even more mutated—but don't call him the future of the position. "Very few humans possess his background or his physical skill set," says Keim, noting that his team's most important offseason move was, well, getting Johnson back at full health.

Occasionally the GM will find himself searching for a weakness or a vice in his young back. So far, he's found that Johnson is terrible at golf and can barely make contact with a batting practice fastball. But that's about it. The only time on record that Johnson has found himself in trouble came this spring when he posted an Instagram video of his rehab from inside the Cardinals' facility, a violation of team rules. That move earned him a rare Arians rebuke. But team officials couldn't have been *too* upset—in the video, Johnson jumps out of a team pool from a standing position, only weeks removed from his injury against the Rams.

It was clear then that those crazy Two Weeks in January had mercifully concluded. And Johnson could focus on his growth at the two jobs that now define him: 1) father; 2) running back. □

ROBERT BECK



ZIMMER OF HOPE

*A NO-NONSENSE LEADER WHO'D GIVE HIS RIGHT EYE FOR HIS TEAM—AND NEARLY DID—**THE VIKINGS' COACH** IS WORKING TO MAKE GOOD ON AN OLD PROMISE*

BY MICHAEL MCKNIGHT

Photograph by BILL FRAKES

THE ROAD to Mike Zimmer's place, Kentucky Highway 16, passes farm after hilly farm, small homes surrounded by rolling pastures, the occasional pickup truck on cinder blocks. There's the Ed-Mar Dairy, four generations strong, and the cornfield where the Skirmish at Snow's Pond was waged between Confederate and Union soldiers in 1862. A big black gate on the shoulder of the road provides the only clue that an NFL coach lives here. Beyond it is a lane lined by cherry trees, planted by Zimmer himself, like most things here on his vast property.

The 61-year-old stands shoeless in his driveway, his socks drooping Maravich-style at his ankles. Wearing a sweaty Vikings T-shirt, he looks as if he was working the land and shooting clay pigeons all morning. (He was.)

Zimmer bought his first 40 acres here in Boone County in 2013, during his last year as the defensive coordinator for the Bengals, whose complex lies a short drive north. Even as he signed the deed, he was concerned he'd be fired—he's always concerned about that—and

be stuck with a big chunk of land that lay nowhere near his next NFL employer. "In coaching you never know how long you're gonna live somewhere," he says. "But my wife used to say, 'You can't live like that, worrying about where you might move.'" Behind Zimmer stands a sapling with purple petals, Vikki Zimmer's favorite color, planted in her memory. She had been gone four years when her husband took her advice and snapped this place up.

Four months after that, when the Vikings hired him to lead their team, Zimmer broke ground on the home where he will likely live out his days. "I'm probably one of the dumbest guys in the world—building a house 12 hours from where I work," he says. But after a 2016 season that challenged him and his team with baroque and innovative forms of adversity, he's glad he listened to Vikki.

He's eager to explain why, so he slips his socked feet into camouflage Crocs, takes a seat behind the wheel of his trusty quad tractor and wraps his hands around the wheel. "Let's go."

SEEING CLEAR
Ten months after tearing his retina mid-game—an injury he coached through—Zimmer returned to Minnesota with purpose.

BARRY SWITZER, the 79-year-old former Cowboys coach who took a chance on a little-known Washington State assistant 23 years ago, recalls, "Zimmer wasn't being paid hardly anything when we brought him on board. It was the year we won Super Bowl XXX, and we all got tickets except Zimmer and a couple other guys. I gave mine to Mike." He laughs, "He still owes me for those."

Switzer, one of only three head coaches to have won a Super Bowl and a college football national title (with Oklahoma, in 1974, '75 and '85), continues, "Mike's modern, but he comes from a different era. See, I always respected the player. A player is yours for life. You get to know his mama and his siblings. What are his goals? His passions?

"I was interested in the guys who wash the jocks and socks too," he says. "Where are they from? What do they want in life?"

This egalitarian approach to team building explains why the Vikings' athletic trainer, Eric Sugarman, and media relations chief, Bob Hagan, are also hanging out in shorts and socks at Zimmer's Kentucky homestead in mid-July, wielding the TV remote as if they own it, taking midday naps, shooting skeet with the boss when the mood strikes. It's why Zimmer insists that all 200 of the team's core staff be invited when he hosts get-togethers in Minnesota.

As the reticent Zimmer puts it, his voice barely audible over the quad's motor, "Barry Switzer taught me how to treat people."

The hills on the Zimmer Ridge Ranch make its 157 acres seem twice that. Like the team he coaches, the foliage on its ridges and valleys may look scattered and raw, but it's all part of Zimmer's plan. He has planted chestnut and hazelnut trees, and placed blackberry bushes at their ankles. There's a vast soybean field that he lets a neighbor harvest and a stack of gooey beehives on the edge of the property, where locals are free to gather honey. Zimmer has carpeted the land with a carefully chosen, native warm-season grasses. The sum of it all makes this a perfect home for wild deer, turkeys, quail, ducks and geese. "[But] I don't shoot anything on the property," Zimmer explains. "I'm more into seeing how good I can make it for the animals."

It all contradicts the fiery, pinch-faced Bengals coordinator who stole the show on the 2009 and '13 seasons of HBO's *Hard Knocks* with his blue language directed at players who fell short of his standard. It's hard to reconcile the thoughtful and

DON JUAN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES

JIM MONE/AP

sensitive architect of Zimmer Ridge Ranch with the winning-obsessed madman who was back on the Bengals' sideline coaching just three days after Vikki died, without warning, of natural causes at age 50.

"I've never met anyone who's as obsessed with football as he is," says Vikings Pro Bowl linebacker Anthony Barr. "But as hard-nosed and aggressive as he is, there's a side of him that's patient, calm. You can sit down and talk with him. It might not be the most comfortable [conversation], but if you step out of your comfort zone and build that relationship, you're rewarded."

"I hope the story you're writing won't be too long," Zimmer says. "I promise I'm not that interesting."

If that were true, though, Deion Sanders would not call as often as he does, now 18 years after they last worked together in Dallas. "Zim was more than a coach to me," Sanders says. "He was a friend, a mentor. Mike Zimmer is a truth teller, a realist."

Zimmer was also a high school baseball star, in Lockport, Ill., in the early 1970s, which empowered him in the mid-'90s to challenge Sanders to a contest in the batting cages. "So we get in my Lamborghini," recalls Sanders, who collected 558 big league hits and went 8 for 15 in the '92 World Series with the Braves, "and [we] pull up to this cage, and I said, 'Let's see what you got.' He said, 'No, you first.' So, like a real ballplayer, I lay down a couple bunts to get my timing down, and he starts talking. 'Why are you bunting in a batting cage?' "

"OTHER COACHES, THE WAY THEY TALK TO PLAYERS, IT'S JUST NOT . . . REAL," SMITH SAYS. "NOTHING ABOUT [ZIMMER] IS FABRICATED, NOTHING'S FAKE."

Sanders rocketed a spray of line drives after that comment. When Zimmer got in there, he promptly fouled one off his own shin. Recalls Sanders, "I have never laughed so hard." (Zimmer waves his hand dismissively at the memory. "This is the guy who still comes up to me and lifts up his shirt so he can tell me, 'Look at these abs!' ")

To listen to the men who have worked with Zimmer is to believe that this country music fan with one good eye (and "no ass," according to Vikings cornerback Terence Newman, who says, "I don't know how his jeans stay up") has a better rapport with his largely twentysomething, mostly African-American roster than any coach in the league.

"I'm not gonna say he's a players' coach, because he hates that," says Minnesota safety Harrison Smith. "Other coaches, the way they talk to players, it's just not . . . *real*. Nothing about [Zimmer] is fabricated, nothing's fake."

"I didn't know Mike when I went to Dallas," says Bill Parcells, who took over the Cowboys five years after Switzer resigned. But Parcells soon saw that his new defensive coordinator "was passionate, committed. He was a tireless worker. Cared about players. I inherited some people who weren't like that. But Mike was a guy I gravitated to."

"It's like he grew up in the inner city, man," says Sanders. "He relates to everyone. And he's intelligent. What Zim said was going to happen in a game, it happened. When your best players see that and start buying in, then everybody follows."

That was the path the Vikings were on one year ago. Coming off a 2015 season in which quarterback Teddy Bridgewater emerged as a budding star and the Vikes snapped the Packers' string of four division titles, expectations were high. They had but one flaw. "I can still remember talking to [Minnesota GM] Rick [Spielman] before last season and saying, 'Man, if Teddy goes down, we're in trouble,' " Zimmer says. " 'We can't lose Teddy.' "

The freak injury that felled Bridgewater during a preseason practice last August—leaving his left knee dislocated and nearly all of its connective tissue torn—was devastating. "I've never seen players so heartsick," Zimmer says.

"The best way to describe it," says Spielman, "is that all the air came out of the balloon. But Zimmer is never gonna be an excusemaker. And his attitude trickled down."

"One of the first things I did was call Parcells," says Zimmer. "He said, 'Well, they're not gonna cancel the games. You gotta figure it out.' "

VIKING QUEST
A tremendously successful assistant in Dallas (far right, in white shirt), Cincy and Atlanta, Zimmer finally got his first head job with Minnesota in 2014.

Four days later the Vikings sent a first-round pick and a conditional fourth-rounder to the Eagles in exchange for Sam Bradford. The five-year veteran quarterbacked Minnesota to a 5–0 start, but the team's success was short-lived, and nearly a year later many of the tsunamis created by Bridgewater's injury have yet to reach shore. It wasn't just the draft picks they gave up; it was the additional $21 million ($25 million, including the roster bonus) they have had to spend for Bradford's services. Zimmer makes it clear that he loves Bradford, who will hold the keys in 2017 while Bridgewater continues to heal, then he adds, "Something like [Bridgewater's injury] affects you for years. Financially, draft-wise, everything. *Everything*."

By October, Bradford's savior status became impossible to maintain, as both starting offensive tackles suffered season-ending injuries. Meanwhile Adrian Peterson, still feeling the fallout from a 2014 child abuse scandal, had also been placed on IR in September. Bradford & Co. went 3–8 over the last 11 games, and offensive coordinator Norv Turner abruptly resigned before Week 9, a departure that remains a touchy subject; it's the only thing Zimmer declines to discuss. For the first time as an NFL head coach, he was getting more bad ink than good.

Oh, and he almost lost an eye.

For weeks last fall Zimmer had felt an ache in his right eye. He ignored it, but what had been an annoyance turned into a torn retina when Zimmer inadvertently scratched his eye with a play card during a loss to the Bears on Halloween. Two November surgeries failed to repair the damage, and though he was forced to sit out the Vikings' two-point loss to Dallas on Dec. 1, Zimmer didn't miss another game. The offseason brought six more surgeries, the last of which came in June with strict orders from management to remove himself from football while he recovered. So Zimmer drove home to Kentucky, a 12-hour haul marked by silence and swearing. "He didn't speak to me for three days," says Spielman, who delivered the message to the coach. "He wanted to set an example for the team, *No matter what, I'm gonna be right here fighting with you*. But our doctors and our ownership group told him he had to step away."

Instead of offering a peaceful escape, Zimmer Ridge Ranch felt "like Stalag 13," the coach says. He can laugh about it now, but being sent home by his employer made him feel powerless.

"I said to the doctor: Is this a lost cause? Because if it is, let's just get rid of [the eye] and forget about it," Zimmer recalls. "There were times I just thought, This is not worth it.

"My sense was, Why are we doing this?" he says. "I need to be up there [in Minnesota]."

MUCH HAS been written and broadcast about the wait Zimmer endured before becoming an NFL head coach at age 57. Urban legend holds that each time he interviewed for a top job, he told executives what they were doing wrong and how he'd fix it. They didn't like being told the first part. But when the Vikings told him they saw directness in his approach, not disrespect, the first thing he did was call his dad. "I'm Minnesota's ninth head coach," he said.

Bill Zimmer was a legendary high school coach in Illinois who has been inducted into four separate Halls of Fame. "He coached me," Mike says, "and he was harder on me than anybody. I remember I threw an interception in a championship game my junior year; I came to the sideline, and he punched me in the chest and said, 'Get the goddam ball there!' But I wouldn't trade it for anything."

The younger Zimmer got a football scholarship to Illinois State, but a neck injury ended his playing career. After a two-year stint as an assistant at Missouri, he spent eight years coaching at Weber State, where he met Vikki while she was jogging one day, and then married her. They started a family and moved to Washington State in 1989; five years later Switzer and the Cowboys called. Aside from feeling that he could've been a more present dad to his son, Adam (now a Vikings assistant), and two daughters, Marki, 30, and Corri, 27, it had all come

BILL FRAKES

together. And no one was prouder than Bill Zimmer.

"He used to come to training camp—Dallas, Cincinnati. He'd stay a week," Mike says. "Parcells would ask him to grade the running backs. [Dallas scouting director] Larry Lacewell used to send videos of prospects to him. He loved it. . . .

"He was never well enough to come to Mankato [site of the Vikings' camps]," he says. "My mom said that was one of the things that motivated him at the end of his life. He wanted to come to a training camp where I was a head coach."

In August 2015, Mike got a call from one of his daughters, with word from Florida. "I was in Mankato, so the Wilfs [Vikings' owners Zygi and Mark] flew me down there. My daughter asked, 'Why don't you watch practice with him?' So I gave him the iPad. His eyes lit up, and he just sat there. That was his happiest day in the hospital." He died about a week later, at age 84.

The day of the funeral, Zimmer got a call from Teddy Bridgewater's mother, Rose Murphy. "She was calling to offer condolences. And I said something to her about Teddy, what a great young man he is—and she stops me. She said, 'I didn't call you to talk about Teddy. I called to talk about your dad.' "

That's the kind of football family Zimmer wants to create. The gesture reminded him of Vikki, whose spirit still guides him. "My kids and I still ask each other, 'What would Vikki do?' " Zimmer says. They asked that question when considering what to do with the Jet Ski sitting in their Texas garage. It was given in the end to the guy who maintained the property. And they asked it when deciding on the appropriate enrollment fee for Zimmer's youth camp in Minnesota. "Vikki would have said, 'Make it free,' " Mike says. "So we did."

"I SAID TO THE DOCTOR: IS THIS A LOST CAUSE? BECAUSE IF IT IS, LET'S JUST GET RID OF THE EYE," SAYS ZIMMER. "THERE WERE TIMES I THOUGHT, THIS IS NOT WORTH IT."

OTHER THAN his diminished vision, the only difference between the Zimmer of today and the Zimmer of yesteryear may be his work schedule. "I'll try to leave the office around 6:30 p.m.," he says. "When I get home, I'll get on the iPad and go 'til about 9:00. But I don't go 'til midnight anymore." Given that he routinely arrives at the office at 4 a.m., Zimmer is describing cutting back to a *17-hour workday*. "I feel more refreshed now," he says, without an ounce of sarcasm.

Then he explains the root of his obsession.

"I've always been worried about being fired," he says. (Never mind that it's never happened.) "I remember the year we won the Super Bowl, that whole week I didn't do anything but work. My family was there, but I was busy watching every third-down play [the 1995 Steelers] ever ran. I walked into the locker room after we won and just went, *Whew*. It was exciting, but I always say, 'If I go back, I'm gonna have a little bit of fun.' "

There are modest expectations for the Vikings of 2017, but Zimmer believes that Bradford, his young playmakers and a rejuvenated defense will rise to the challenge because of what they endured last year. "We're mentally tougher than everybody else," he says with his vintage candor.

One of the last stops on the tour of Zimmer's house is the bar area downstairs, where he keeps a stone that was given to him by Hall of Famer Bud Grant, the iconic Vikings coach. "You may not have what every coach needs: a good luck rock," Grant scrawled in the accompanying note.

AMY CONN-GUTIERREZ/AP

"This is an unpolished agate from the shores of Lake Superior, my home. Every little bit helps."

Zimmer laughs. "I need it," he says.

That night Zimmer orders pizza and sits around with Sugarman, Hagan, and Lenny and Karen Collins, Zimmer's neighbors who have lived in the area for 36 years. Over a bottle of homemade blackberry wine, courtesy of the Collinses, the laughs last until the sparkle of fireflies covers the surrounding fields.

"Mike's tough," Switzer says. "He's seen hard times. I pull for him. I hope he gets to the Super Bowl . . . so I can get my damn tickets."

Zimmer is not the type to issue guarantees, so when he makes a promise to the coach who gave him his first NFL opportunity, it might as well be etched in unpolished agate. "Coach Switzer," Zimmer says, "will get his tickets." □

SCOUTING

THE FILM that NFL coaches circulate—the so-called All-22 tape—is silent. There are no on-screen graphics, no close-ups between snaps. One camera captures the field from a sideline, the other from behind the line of scrimmage. Football is presented as a geometric exercise. And it's riveting.

That film is how I watch 90% of NFL games. Through that, I've come to learn that the difference between good teams and bad ones is as subtle as the difference between white and eggshell white. Any outfit I project for even six wins could very well make a Super Bowl run. Truly. I had to choose 20 teams to miss the playoffs, and 15 of those left me uneasy.

In the AFC you could do worse in your fantasy draft than to choose Steelers exclusively—Roethlisberger, Bell, Brown . . . and now receiver Martavis Bryant is back. All of that, plus a top three O-line and an improving young defense? *Sheesh*. Meanwhile, the D in Baltimore got stingier, inching toward classic Ravens status. The Chiefs are the best-schemed team in their division, the Raiders the most talented. The Titans are an intriguing mix of both.

Of course, none of these teams compares with the Patriots, that franchise you either outright love or outright hate. I searched for the courage to pick against New England, but common sense kept getting in the way. A team that went 17–2 one year ago has gotten better on both sides of the ball, even if you consider Julian Edelman's ACL tear. Rob Gronkowski appears to be healthy; electrifying receiver Brandin Cooks arrived from the Saints; and with the additions of Rex Burkhead (Bengals) and Mike Gillislee (Bills), there are now more capable runners on this roster than in the entire central time zone. Then there's the D, which gave up a league-low 15.6 points per game last year, then added a stud corner, Stephon Gilmore. (Have we even mentioned Messrs. Brady and Belichick?) I'll go with the Pats over the Pack, who, while talented, run too hot and cold. **PATRIOTS 31, PACKERS 27**

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
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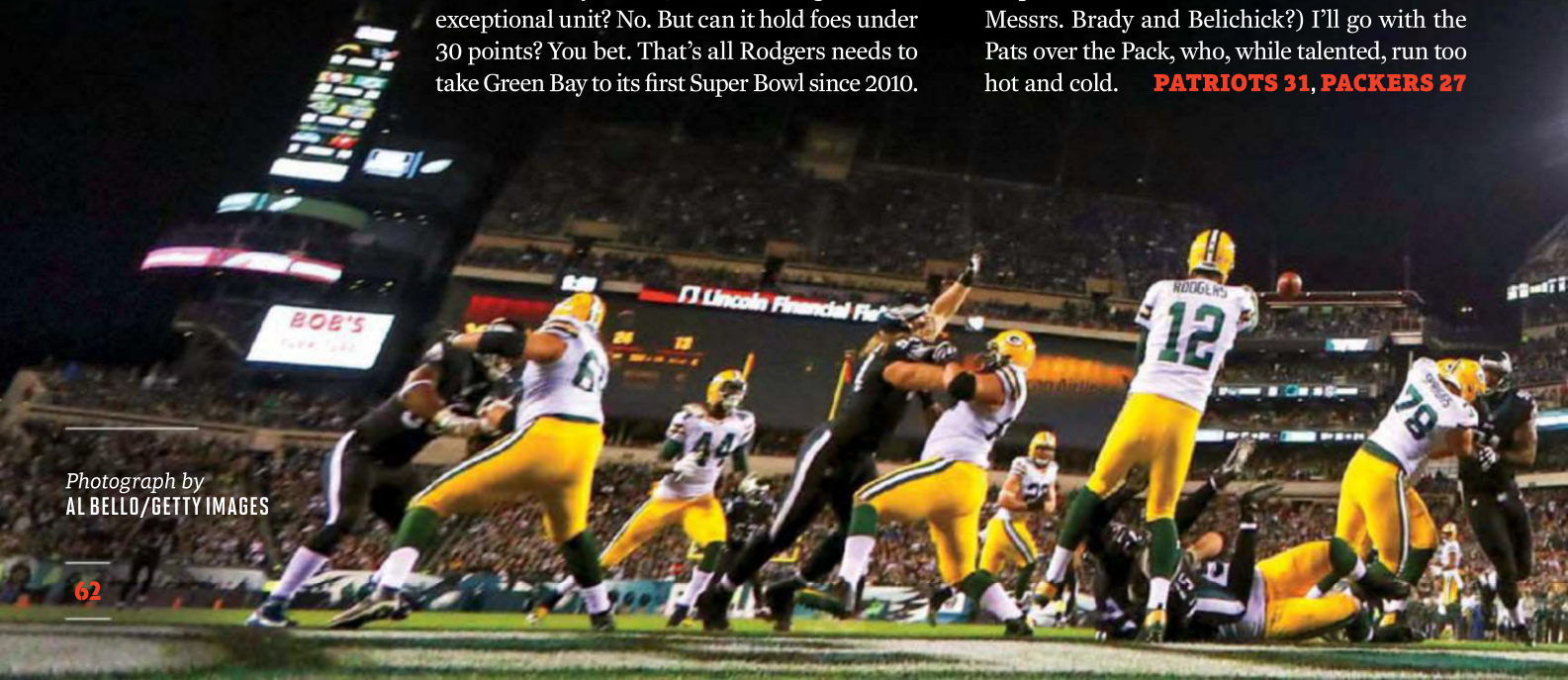
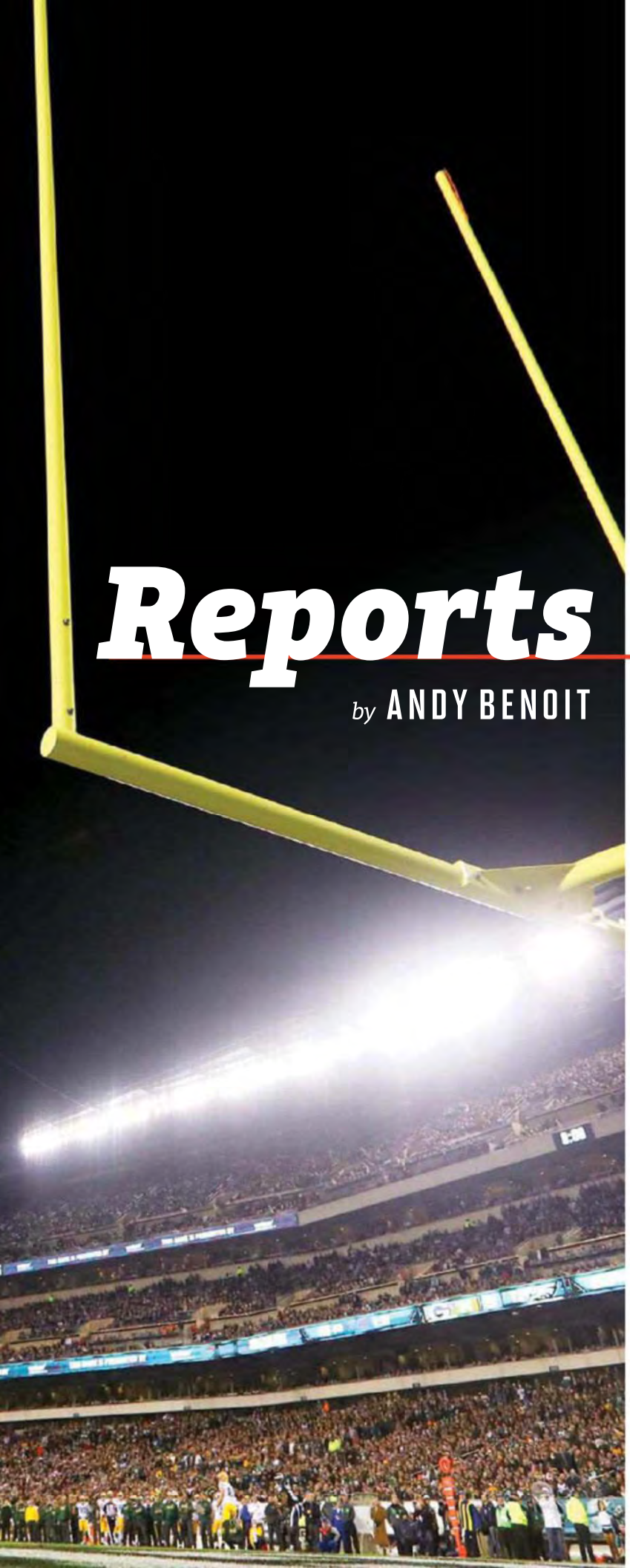
Our expert stacked up the NFL's top talents, 1 to 400. Read on (or head online) to see where everyone falls.

At least I feel great about the teams I *did* project to make the postseason. The Giants have a star-studded D and a markedly improved offense. The Bucs, too, bolstered an already rising O. The Vikings have the NFC's best defense . . . unless the Seahawks do . . . or maybe it's the young Falcons.

The final obstacle on Atlanta's path to Super Bowl LI, Green Bay, appears even more dangerous than before. Aaron Rodgers's weapons have matured, and his arsenal has expanded. And it's hard to imagine that the Packers' D, after some secondary tweaks, won't be stronger. Is it an exceptional unit? No. But can it hold foes under 30 points? You bet. That's all Rodgers needs to take Green Bay to its first Super Bowl since 2010.



Photograph by
AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES



Reports

by ANDY BENOIT

PROJECTED 2017 STANDINGS & POSTSEASON

AFC

EAST		SOUTH	
Patriots 1	14–2	Titans 4	10–6
Dolphins	7–9	Texans	9–7
Bills	5–11	Colts	8–8
Jets	3–13	Jaguars	5–11

NORTH		WEST	
Steelers 2	11–5	Raiders 3	10–6
Ravens 6	9–7	Chiefs 5	10–6
Bengals	5–11	Chargers	7–9
Browns	4–12	Broncos	6–10

WILD CARD
6 Ravens over Raiders 3
5 Chiefs over Titans 4

DIVISIONAL ROUND
1 Patriots over Ravens 6
2 Steelers over Chiefs 5

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME
1 Patriots over Steelers 2

NFC

EAST		SOUTH	
Giants 4	10–6	Falcons 1	12–4
Cowboys	10–6	Bucs 6	10–6
Eagles	8–8	Panthers	7–9
Redskins	7–9	Saints	6–10

NORTH		WEST	
Vikings 2	11–5	Seahawks 3	11–5
Packers 5	11–5	Cardinals	8–8
Bears	6–10	Rams	7–9
Lions	5–11	49ers	4–12

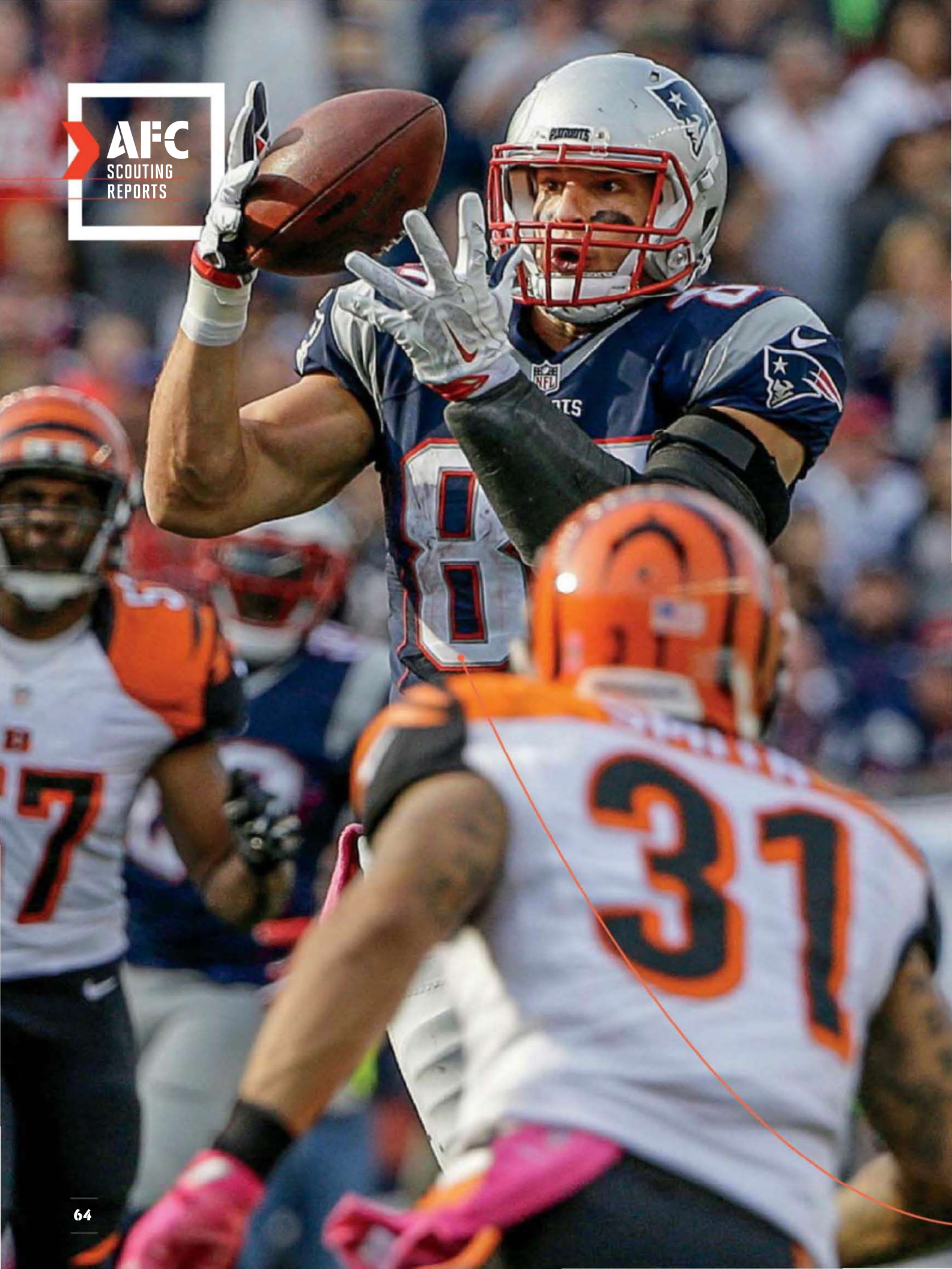
WILD CARD
3 Seahawks over Bucs 6
5 Packers over Giants 4

DIVISIONAL ROUND
2 Vikings over Seahawks 3
5 Packers over Falcons 1

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME
5 Packers over Vikings 2

Seed
Record

SUPER BOWL LII
Feb. 4, 2018
U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis
Patriots 31 Packers 27



1

"WITH FIVE PASS CATCHERS SPREAD WIDE, BRADY CAN DINK AND DUNK DEFENSES TO DEATH."

New England Patriots

Part of what is so impressive about TOM BRADY is that he's succeeded in a variety of systems. In 2016, over the course of 19 games, the Patriots transitioned from an almost strictly horizontal passing attack to one that was a little more vertical. Wide receiver CHRIS HOGAN, picked up last offseason, played a big role here. Second-year receiver MALCOLM MITCHELL did too, on the perimeter. It looks as if New England will continue going in this direction, with ROB GRONKOWSKI back healthy and speedy receiver BRANDIN COOKS added from the Saints.

➜ The beauty of the offense is that it doesn't *have* to be vertical. The receiving skills of pass-game running back JAMES WHITE (and maybe in his place, at some point, former Bengal REX BURKHEAD) help create a potent "spread empty formation" package, with five pass catchers flanked out wide. From this you see the underneath routes that Brady uses to dink and dunk defenses to death. (That's what happened in Super Bowl LI; Brady's longest completion was 28 yards.) Cooks has the quickness to prosper in their underneath passing game.

➜ Losing JULIAN EDELMAN for the year with an ACL injury hurts. But the Patriots have the depth to replace him, starting with DANNY AMENDOLA, who made three huge catches in Super Bowl LI that were essential to New England's comeback.

➜ This is a bend-but-don't break defense. The Patriots don't usually blitz until their opponent gets inside field goal range, and many of their coverages have two safeties back. That allows them to disguise and, more important, to double-team No. 1 receivers, which they almost always do.

➜ Their only real weakness is the pass rush. Maybe that improves this year with the continued development of defensive end TREY FLOWERS, a masterly technician entering his third season. But even then, they're still thin here. New England has no threatening edge benders. It's unusual for a team to play a conservative, coverage-based scheme, get little from its four-man rush and still finish with the No. 1 scoring defense. But that's what the Patriots did last year.

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
14–2
2016 RECORD
14–2

SEPT. 7 THURSDAY vs. KC
SEPT. 17 AT NO
SEPT. 24 vs. HOU
OCT. 1 vs. CAR
OCT. 5 THURSDAY AT TB
OCT. 15 AT NYJ
OCT. 22 vs. ATL
OCT. 29 vs. LAC
BYE
NOV. 12 AT DEN
NOV. 19 IN MEXICO CITY AT OAK
NOV. 26 vs. MIA
DEC. 3 AT BUF
DEC. 11 MONDAY AT MIA
DEC. 17 AT PIT
DEC. 24 vs. BUF
DEC. 31 vs. NYJ

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
1	2	14	18	2
Strength				

ELISE AMENDOLA/AP (GRONKOWSKI); JIM MAHONEY/AP (COOKS); ROB LEITER/GETTY IMAGES (BRADY)

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

1 TOM BRADY QB
7 ROB GRONKOWSKI TE
36 DEVIN MCCOURTY FS
86 DONT'A HIGHTOWER LB
106 MALCOLM BUTLER CB
119 JULIAN EDELMAN WR
120 STEPHON GILMORE CB
138 BRANDIN COOKS WR
148 TREY FLOWERS DE
191 PATRICK CHUNG SS
212 MALCOM BROWN DT
268 NATE SOLDER T
272 ALAN BRANCH DT
273 MARCUS CANNON T
329 REX BURKHEAD RB
331 LAWRENCE GUY DE
335 JAMES WHITE RB
345 SHAQ MASON G
383 DAVID HARRIS LB

OUT FOR SEASON

2

"THE BEST SEASON OF CUTLER'S CAREER CAME IN CHICAGO IN 2015—HIS ONLY ONE PLAYING FOR GASE."

Miami Dolphins

The Dolphins will be just fine with JAY CUTLER taking over for Ryan Tannehill, who is out for the year with a knee injury. The best season of Cutler's career came in Chicago in 2015—his only one playing for ADAM GASE, who was the Bears' coordinator. Historically, Cutler's poor decisions and mechanic deficiencies tend to come late in downs; Gase's system will require that Cutler get the ball out early.

➜ No NFL coach loves any formation more than Gase loves an unbalanced three-by-one (three wide receivers to one side and a tight end alone on the other). The unusual distribution forces a defense to reveal if it is in man or zone coverage. It also creates opportunities to flood one side of the field or set up downfield crossing patterns. The problem with the Dolphins' three-by-one sets in '16 was that they had no tight end threat, which meant that Tannehill almost never threw to the weak side. That's why Miami essentially traded left tackle Branden Albert to the Jaguars for JULIUS THOMAS, whom Gase used so effectively as the coordinator in Denver.

➜ Miami felt comfortable dealing Albert because of last year's first-round pick, LAREMY TUNSIL. His athleticism is unbelievable. The Dolphins should now be even better in their staple wide receiver screen game—at least on passes to the left, where Tunsil can get out in front on the perimeter.

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
7–9
2016 RECORD
10–6

SEPT. 10 VS. TB
SEPT. 17 AT LAC
SEPT. 24 AT NYJ
OCT. 1 IN LONDON VS. NO
OCT. 8 VS. TEN
OCT. 15 AT ATL
OCT. 22 VS. NYJ
OCT. 26 THURSDAY AT BAL
NOV. 5 VS. OAK
NOV. 13 MONDAY AT CAR
BYE
NOV. 26 AT NE
DEC. 3 VS. DEN
DEC. 11 MONDAY VS. NE
DEC. 17 AT BUF
DEC. 24 AT KC
DEC. 31 VS. BUF

➜ Miami has a zone-based rushing attack, which you wouldn't think would suit 6-foot, 223-pound JAY AJAYI. Speed, which Ajayi lacks, may seem important in a zone scheme, but it's less so than the ability to plant a foot and cut downhill. Here, Ajayi thrives. And once he gets rolling, he's difficult to tackle.

➜ First-time defensive coordinator MATT BURKE, replacing the departed Vance Joseph, has two disruptive tackles for his straightforward 4–3 zone scheme. One we all know: four-time All-Pro NDAMUKONG SUH. His less renowned counterpart is third-year man JORDAN PHILLIPS. At 6' 6" and 333 pounds, Phillips has the size to play nose shade (the gap between the guard and center) and the quickness to cross over a blocker and penetrate.

RIC TAPIA/AP (SUH); LOGAN BOWLES/AP (CUTLER)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
22	10	8	20	16
		Strength		

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

51 NDAMUKONG SUH DT
80 MIKE POUNCEY C
134 CAMERON WAKE DE
142 RESHAD JONES SS
178 JARVIS LANDRY WR
182 LAREMY TUNSIL T
186 JAY AJAYI RB
241 JORDAN PHILLIPS DT
275 LAWRENCE TIMMONS LB
327 JULIUS THOMAS TE
330 ANDRE BRANCH DE
347 RYAN TANNEHILL QB

OUT FOR SEASON

"THREE CONCERNS ON DEFENSE: RUSH, SAFETY AND CORNERS."

Buffalo Bills

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
5–11
2016 RECORD
7–9

SEPT. 10 VS. NYJ
SEPT. 17 AT CAR
SEPT. 24 VS. DEN
OCT. 1 AT ATL
OCT. 8 AT CIN
BYE
OCT. 22 VS. TB
OCT. 29 VS. OAK
NOV. 2 THURSDAY AT NYJ
NOV. 12 VS. NO
NOV. 19 AT LAC
NOV. 26 AT KC
DEC. 3 VS. NE
DEC. 10 VS. IND
DEC. 17 VS. MIA
DEC. 24 AT NE
DEC. 31 AT MIA

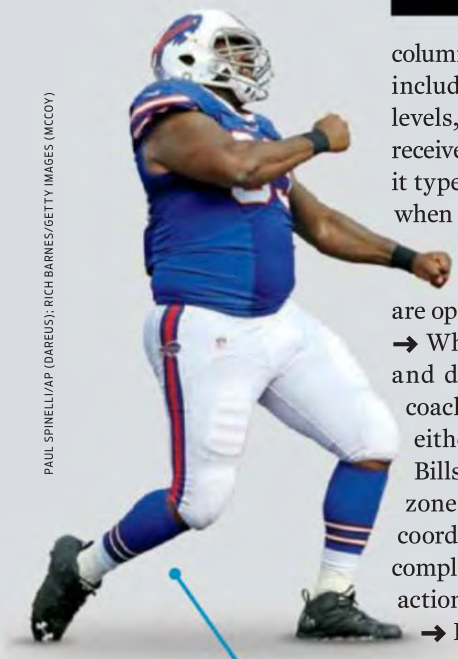
TYROD TAYLOR throws one of the best deep balls in the NFL, but that and mobility are all you'll find in his "strengths" column. The quarterback's weaknesses include accuracy at the intermediate levels, an inability to anticipate open receivers (he's a see-it-and-then-throw-it type) and discomfort in the pocket when his early reads aren't there. But Taylor's biggest flaw is that many times, even when his early reads are open, he doesn't get the ball out.

➜ When a QB is antsy in the pocket and doesn't anticipate throws, his coach must design plays with simple either/or reads. What will help the Bills' offense, though, is the outside-zone run schemes of new offensive coordinator RICK DENNISON, which will complement those pass designs. Play-action will be huge for Buffalo.

➜ How will LESEAN MCCOY fit Dennison's scheme? The 29-year-old running back is gifted enough to thrive in any system, but he's at his best dancing around to set up blocks. He's done that well in his two seasons in Buffalo, when the rushing plays often featured pull blockers (usually Pro Bowl left guard RICHIE INCOGNITO). An outside zone scheme, however, doesn't use pullers. Instead, the O-line moves in unison, and the back must wait for a hole to develop. This is not McCoy's natural style, but with his speed and agility on the perimeter, he'll still produce.

➜ The book on new coach SEAN MCDERMOTT: He prefers a 4–3 zone and, like his mentor, longtime Eagles defensive coordinator Jim Johnson, he selectively employs designer blitzes. Also like Johnson, McDermott will adjust his zone coverages to create subtle disguises or gain favorable matchups.

➜ Three significant concerns about the Bills' defense: 1) It lacks edge rushers. JERRY HUGHES has the speed and fluidity to turn the corner, but second-year man SHAQ LAWSON must rely on technique and has room to grow; 2) the secondary is thin, especially at safety; and 3) cornerback is a question, too. First-round pick TRE'DAVIOUS WHITE is a rookie, and with Ronald Darby traded to Philadelphia, they will now work in newcomer E.J. GAINES from the Rams. If the new group doesn't work, Buffalo will have problems.



PAUL SPINELLI/AP (DAREUS); RICH BARNES/GETTY IMAGES (MCCOY)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
30	24	10	23	18
Weakness				

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

52 LESEAN MCCOY RB
152 RICHIE INCOGNITO LG
174 MARCELL DAREUS DT
189 MICAH HYDE CB
243 ERIC WOOD C
302 KYLE WILLIAMS DT
303 CHARLES CLAY TE
325 LORENZO ALEXANDER DE
326 CORDY GLENN LT

4

"THE JETS ARE BEREFT OF QUALITY WIDE RECEIVERS, AND THEIR TIGHT ENDS CAUGHT ONLY 18 BALLS LAST YEAR."

New York Jets

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
3–13
2016 RECORD
5–11

SEPT. 10 AT BUF
SEPT. 17 AT OAK
SEPT. 24 VS. MIA
OCT. 1 VS. JAC
OCT. 8 AT CLE
OCT. 15 VS. NE
OCT. 22 AT MIA
OCT. 29 VS. ATL
NOV. 2 THURSDAY VS. BUF
NOV. 12 AT TB
BYE
NOV. 26 VS. CAR
DEC. 3 VS. KC
DEC. 10 AT DEN
DEC. 17 AT NO
DEC. 24 VS. LAC
DEC. 31 AT NE

This offseason the Jets hired JOHN MORTON, the Saints' receivers coach in 2015 and '16, to be their offensive coordinator. This will be the first time Morton, 47, has directed an NFL offense, and it's imperative that he incorporate New York's running backs into the passing game. Not only are the Jets bereft of quality wide receivers, but they're also playing with the same tight end group that last season combined for 18 receptions and 173 yards, by far the worst totals in the league at that position.

➜ When you lack dangerous receivers, your passing game must rely on play design. The effective designs exploit mismatches, but with the Jets' roster, running back versus linebacker is the only chance for a favorable one—and that's if MATT FORTE, 31, can still get the job done. He caught 102 balls for the Bears in '14 but just 30 last year. Forte might be reaching the point where his receiving contributions are restricted to routes coming out of the backfield, which means he's not offering much more in that regard than 28-year-old backup BILAL POWELL.

➜ With the right players, coach TODD BOWLES schemes aggressively with matchup coverages and designer pressures—preferably those that attack up the middle, in the quarterback's sight lines. Bowles knew he couldn't run his full scheme last year, perhaps as early as Week 1. That's when the Bengals' A.J. Green toasted Darrelle Revis and Bowles realized he no longer had a corner who could shut down top receivers one-on-one. This offseason New York replaced Revis with free-agent signee MORRIS CLAIBORNE. The ex-Cowboy is intriguing, but not the kind of stopper who travels with No. 1 wideouts. And opposite Claiborne the Jets have penalty-prone veteran BUSTER SKRINE.

➜ Safeties can create disguised pressures and coverages; the more versatility you have there, the more multifaceted your D can be. In Bowles's matchup zone, the safeties must cover tight ends man-to-man and be able to stay with wide receivers who enter their zone and then go vertical. Given these demands, it's no surprise New York used the draft to shore up the position, picking JAMAL ADAMS from LSU in the first round and MARCUS MAYE from Florida in the second.

TOM DIPACE/AP (WILLIAMS); AL TIELEMANS/AP (ADAMS)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
29	32	26	13	32
	Weakness			

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

74 LEONARD WILLIAMS DE
93 MUHAMMAD WILKERSON DE
105 SHELDON RICHARDSON DE
350 MORRIS CLAIBORNE CB
395 QUINCY ENUNWA WR

OUT FOR SEASON

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1

Pittsburgh Steelers

"ROETHLISBERGER HAS EVOLVED INTO A FIELD GENERAL QUARTERBACK, BOTH BEFORE AND AFTER THE SNAP."

Meet the most dangerous offense in football. It can terrify defenses through the air with its four-receiver sets, utilizing the unprecedented collective speed of ANTONIO BROWN, MARTAVIS BRYANT, SAMMIE COATES and DARRIUS HEYWARD-BEY. (Oh, and the fifth eligible receiver in that grouping would be LE'VEON BELL.) Or, the Steelers can be a ground juggernaut, pounding the rock behind six offensive linemen or with extra H-backs and tight ends. That's what they did last season when Bell rushed for 835 yards in Weeks 11 through 16.

➜ BEN ROETHLISBERGER and the front five are the constants in the offensive packages. Roethlisberger has evolved into a field general, both before and after the snap. And at 35 he can still extend plays—in fact, he can do so even more easily than in years past, considering that his line, somewhat quietly, has become one of the NFL's two or three best.

➜ Bell is the most patient runner the game has ever seen. He can afford to be patient because his acceleration and lateral quickness allow him to burst ahead the instant he sees daylight.

➜ Defensive coordinator KEITH BUTLER talked this offseason about the importance of playing more basic coverages and rushing only four. Presumably, he'd like to employ a little more man-to-man. In the AFC championship game against New England, Butler used strictly zone, and Tom Brady picked it apart.

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
11–5
2016 RECORD
11–5

SEPT. 10 AT CLE
SEPT. 17 VS. MIN
SEPT. 24 AT CHI
OCT. 1 AT BAL
OCT. 8 VS. JAC
OCT. 15 AT KC
OCT. 22 VS. CIN
OCT. 29 AT DET
BYE
NOV. 12 AT IND
NOV. 16 THURSDAY VS. TEN
NOV. 26 VS. GB
DEC. 4 MONDAY AT CIN
DEC. 10 VS. BAL
DEC. 17 VS. NE
DEC. 25 MONDAY AT HOU
DEC. 31 VS. CLE

➜ The departure of inside linebacker Lawrence Timmons, who signed with the Dolphins, is critical when you consider that no replacement was brought in. Instead, Pittsburgh is promoting fifth-year man VINCE WILLIAMS. He's a classic first- and second-down run-thumper, but he may have some trouble teaming with the electrifying RYAN SHAZIER in nickel coverage. Don't be surprised if the Steelers do what they did four years ago and become a dime sub-package defense, with third safety ROBERT GOLDEN essentially playing linebacker.

➜ The defensive line has a chance to be terrific. CAMERON HEYWARD is a shrewd technician at end. STEPHON TUITT plays with effort and athleticism from the other end. JAVON HARGRAVE has equally impressive athleticism—which is rare in a 305-pound nosetackle.

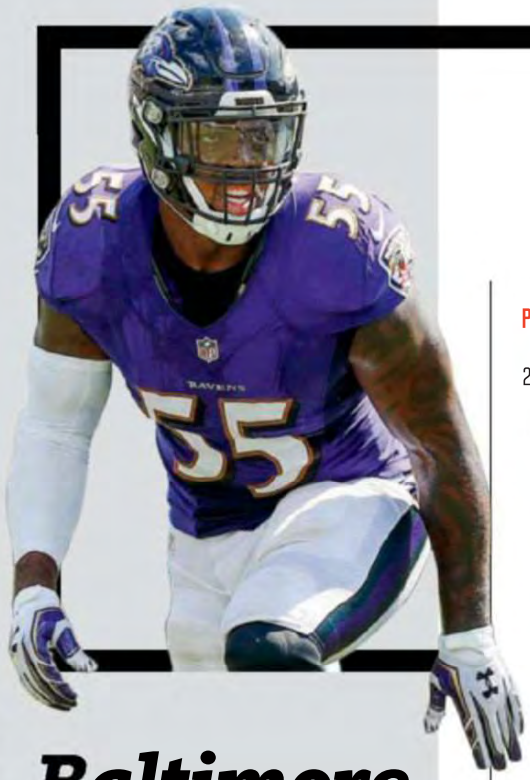
DAVID E. KLUTHO (ROETHLISBERGER); AL TIELEMANS (BELL)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
3	1	2	12	14
	Strength			

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

5 LE'VEON BELL RB
10 ANTONIO BROWN WR
16 BEN ROETHLISBERGER QB
50 DAVID DECASTRO G
61 RYAN SHAZIER LB
62 MAURKICE POUNCEY C
107 CAMERON HEYWARD DE
149 MARTAVIS BRYANT WR
165 MARCUS GILBERT T
193 STEPHON TUITT DE
219 RAMON FOSTER G
242 BUD DUPREE OLB
309 JAVON HARGRAVE NT
341 JAMES HARRISON OLB



2

"FLACCO HAD TOO MANY INCOMPLETIONS AND INEXCUSABLE INTERCEPTIONS."

PATRICK SMITH/GETTY IMAGES (FLACCO); KEVIN TERRELL/AP (SUGGS)

Baltimore Ravens

JOE FLACCO needs to be more consistent than he was last year. His rifle arm will yield a handful of *Wow!* throws each week, some of which will result in big plays. But the Ravens can't subsist on that; they want a quick, rhythmic passing attack. Flacco must rediscover his disciplined mechanics and decision making. He simply had too many incomplete passes, unrecognized open receivers and inexcusable interceptions in 2016.

➜ Baltimore needs to be much more run-oriented than it was a year ago. Yes, losing top zone runner KENNETH DIXON for '17 with a left-knee injury hurts. But TERRANCE WEST, while less disciplined, is still capable of making defenders miss. DANNY WOODHEAD has been signed from San Diego as a passing-down weapon—he can line up anywhere as a receiver, plus he's great on check-downs—but he is also capable of running out of three-receiver sets, which fits Baltimore's zone ground game. A run-oriented offense would give a boost to the receivers, who would face more basic coverages.

➜ Former Cardinals safety TONY JEFFERSON was a great free-agent pickup this offseason. Defensive coordinator DEAN PEES played a lot of zone coverage in '16, but with Jefferson, who can match up with tight ends anywhere on the field, Pees can use more man-to-man—and then deploy the expansive blitz packages that he loves.

➜ Baltimore's was far and away the best run defense in football before it wore down after Week 13. Tackles BRANDON WILLIAMS and MICHAEL PIERCE were the main reasons. Both can anchor against double teams, and Williams can move shockingly well for a 6' 1" 340-pounder.

➜ TERRELL SUGGS is a Hall of Famer. He doesn't just rush the passer. His edge-setting and ball-chasing in run defense are superb. And there isn't a stat for this, but Suggs is adept at jamming tight ends as they come off the line, which compromises an offense's spacing and timing. Also, teams are reluctant to run read-option against Suggs because, dating to the Super Bowl XLVII win over the 49ers, he has shown an eagerness to drill the quarterback whether he keeps the ball or hands it off.

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
9–7
2016 RECORD
8–8

SEPT. 10	AT CIN
SEPT. 17	VS. CLE
SEPT. 24 IN LONDON	AT JAC
OCT. 1	VS. PIT
OCT. 8	AT OAK
OCT. 15	VS. CHI
OCT. 22	AT MIN
OCT. 26 THURSDAY	VS. MIA
NOV. 5	AT TEN
	BYE
NOV. 19	AT GB
NOV. 27 MONDAY	VS. HOU
DEC. 3	VS. DET
DEC. 10	AT PIT
DEC. 17	AT CLE
DEC. 23 SATURDAY	VS. IND
DEC. 31	VS. CIN

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
11	26	29	9	9
		Weakness		

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

47 BRANDON WILLIAMS NT
69 MARSHAL YANDA RG
85 TERRELL SUGGS OLB
101 C.J. MOSLEY LB
112 TONY JEFFERSON SS
122 ERIC WEDDLE FS
136 JOE FLACCO QB
274 JEREMY MACLIN WR
279 BRANDON CARR CB
323 MICHAEL PIERCE DE
324 RONNIE STANLEY LT
394 DANNY WOODHEAD RB

3

Cincinnati Bengals

"THE INTERIOR LINE STRUGGLED TO PICK UP PASS-BLOCKING ASSIGNMENTS, AND NOW IT HAS LOST ITS TOP TALENT."

ANDY DALTON's career has been full of highs and lows. Never was that truer than last season. When Dalton had room in the pocket he exhibited decent arm strength and savvy decision making. When he didn't, he floundered. The problem: Dalton doesn't have a great feel for nuanced pocket movement. He lacks Tom Brady's sense for sidestepping defenders and giving himself space. This is why he ends up mired in muddy pockets more than he should.

➜ The O-line didn't help Dalton much. Last year the interior group struggled to pick up pass-blocking assignments on the fly—and that was before it lost its top talent, right guard Kevin Zeitler, to the Browns this offseason. On the edges, young right tackle CEDRIC OGBUEHI simply couldn't handle the bull rush. Now he's being asked to replace one of the league's steadiest left tackles, Andrew Whitworth. (Yikes.) That means the new right tackle will be 2015 second-round pick JAKE FISHER, who didn't get on the field regularly last season despite the struggles of Ogbuehi and washed-up veteran ERIC WINSTON. (Double yikes.)

➜ The Bengals drafted running back JOE MIXON in the second round from Oklahoma, and his arrival may mean the end of JEREMY HILL's days as a lead back. Besides being more decisive on runs, Mixon, a gifted receiver, can give the offense more options on first and second down.

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
5–11
2016 RECORD
6–9

SEPT. 10 VS. BAL
SEPT. 14 THURSDAY VS. HOU
SEPT. 24 AT GB
OCT. 1 AT CLE
OCT. 8 VS. BUF
BYE
OCT. 22 AT PIT
OCT. 29 VS. IND
NOV. 5 AT JAC
NOV. 12 AT TEN
NOV. 19 AT DEN
NOV. 26 VS. CLE
DEC. 4 MONDAY VS. PIT
DEC. 10 VS. CHI
DEC. 17 AT MIN
DEC. 24 VS. DET
DEC. 31 AT BAL

➜ TYLER EIFERT, returning from a back injury, is an important piece in the passing game, particularly in the red zone. Mismatch-making tight ends like Eifert are valuable because where they line up often forces a defense to reveal its coverage.

➜ PAUL GUENTHER is one of NFL's best blitz designers, and yet he blitzed the least of any defensive coordinator last year. Coach MARVIN LEWIS is comfortable playing straightforward zone, but it would behoove the Bengals to return to the pressure concepts they ran under previous coordinator MIKE ZIMMER. This defense doesn't have consistent edge rushers. Left end CARLOS DUNLAP is long and talented but, inexplicably, he disappears for stretches. At right end MICHAEL JOHNSON, 30, disappears for weeks. It's surprising that the Bengals didn't do more to upgrade at that position.

ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES (GREEN); IAN JOHNSON/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (MIXON)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
21	7	31	28	22
		Weakness		

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
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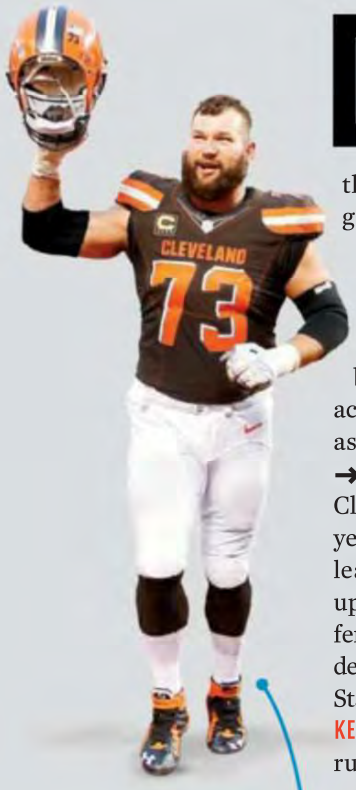
33 A.J. GREEN WR
55 GENO ATKINS DT
123 TYLER EIFERT TE
158 DRE KIRKPATRICK CB
197 GEORGE ILOKA FS
208 CARLOS DUNLAP DE
282 VONTAZE BURFICT LB
300 GIOVANI BERNARD RB
338 ANDY DALTON QB
388 ADAM JONES CB
400 RUSSELL BODINE C

"DRAFTING GARRETT WAS A NO-BRAINER; THEIR BIGGEST DEFECT ON D WAS THEIR PASS RUSH."

Cleveland Browns



RON SCHWANE/AP (THOMAS); AARON M. SPRECHER/AP (GARRETT)

This year's Browns are better than last year's, but their passing game may not improve much, and in today's NFL, that's enough to keep a team in the gutter. Obviously much hinges on second-round rookie DESHONE KIZER, who is likely their starting quarterback. He flashed athleticism and throwing prowess at Notre Dame, but he can be inconsistent with his accuracy—which could be a problem as he adjusts to the pro game.

➜ Another passing-game problem: Cleveland has no proven targets. Last year's top pick, COREY COLEMAN, had to learn the position from the ground up after coming from the spread offense at Baylor, where receivers don't develop in that unconventional scheme. Starting opposite Coleman is free agent KENNY BRITT, 28, whose drops and route-running glitches have kept him from becoming a consistent threat. And coach HUE JACKSON's system asks much of its tight ends, which means he'll be leaning heavily on a first-round rookie, DAVID NJOKU from Miami.

➜ Drafting Texas A&M defensive end MYLES GARRETT with the No. 1 pick was a no-brainer. Cleveland's biggest deficiency on D last season was its pass rush. Every other passing-down lineman on the roster is better equipped to rush the quarterback from inside, rather than off the edge, where Garrett can excel. But if the rookie doesn't produce right away, this defense is in trouble.

➜ The Browns' second-biggest issue on D in 2016 was their safeties, who were out of position against the run and often missed tackles, especially out of looks such as Cover 2, where they began the play back deep. So it was no surprise that Cleveland selected hybrid thumper JABRILL PEPPERS out of Michigan with the 25th pick, then acquired '14 first-round safety CALVIN PRYOR from the Jets. Once new coordinator GREGG WILLIAMS is able to trust his safeties, his play-calling will be more aggressive.

➜ If Williams feels his corners can match up, expect the Browns to blitz often. With athletes such as Peppers and former Patriots linebacker JAMIE COLLINS in the middle of the field and a weak pass rush (except, potentially, from Garrett), manufacturing more pressure makes sense.

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
4–12
2016 RECORD
1–15

SEPT. 10	VS. PIT
SEPT. 17	AT BAL
SEPT. 24	AT IND
OCT. 1	VS. CIN
OCT. 8	VS. NYJ
OCT. 15	AT HOU
OCT. 22	VS. TEN
OCT. 29	IN LONDON VS. MIN
	BYE
NOV. 12	AT DET
NOV. 19	VS. JAC
NOV. 26	AT CIN
DEC. 3	AT LAC
DEC. 10	VS. GB
DEC. 17	VS. BAL
DEC. 24	AT CHI
DEC. 31	AT PIT

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
32	31	6	31	19
Weakness				

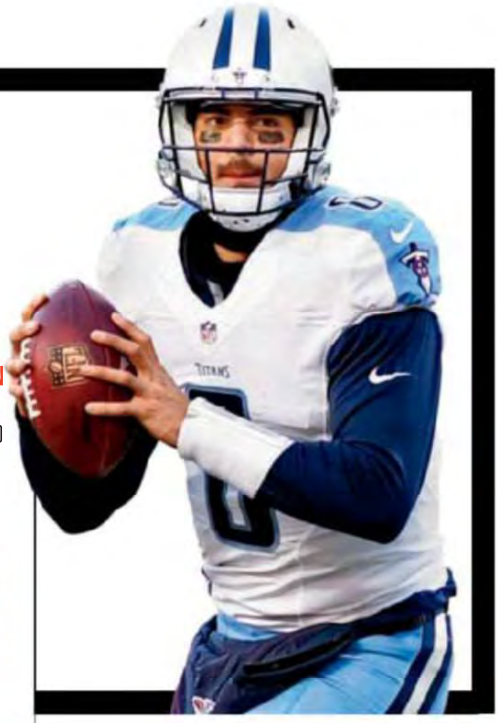
ANDY BENOIT'S 400 ON.SI.COM/400

38 JOE THOMAS T
113 JOE HADEN CB
137 JAMIE COLLINS LB
187 KEVIN ZEITLER G
227 JOEL BITONIO G
239 DANNY SHELTON NT
293 DUKE JOHNSON RB
328 ISAIAH CROWELL RB
376 CARL NASSIB DE

1

Tennessee Titans

"MARIOTA HAS THE MAKEUP TO BE A STAR, BUT HIS ACCURACY WAVERED AND IN 2016 HE MADE TOO MANY POOR DECISIONS."



Quietly, the Titans had an impressive offense last year, with an eight-game stretch in which they averaged 30.8 points. What stood out was their schematic diversity. They mostly went with an old-school, smashmouth approach that regularly included extra running backs and tight ends. But late in halves, when they were great, they used a spread with three or four receivers.

➜ They've added talent at WR, drafting COREY DAVIS of Western Michigan with the fifth pick and signing ERIC DECKER from the Jets, but it's still not a fast group. Tennessee will have to continue manufacturing deep shots through play design. That means a first-down play-action passing game—something the Titans developed well last season.

➜ MARCUS MARIOTA has the makeup to be a star, especially if he's a complementary QB in a run-first offense. That said, he must be more consistent. His accuracy wavers, which is unusual for a passer with such a compact delivery. Early last season he also made too many poor, improvised decisions late in the down.

➜ Twelfth-year tight end DELANIE WALKER is invaluable. The Titans can line up in "13" personnel (one-back, three tight ends) and not sacrifice many of their offensive concepts because Walker can act as the second wide receiver. Last season the Titans played 87 snaps of 13 personnel, second to only the Chiefs (101). Their QB rating on 26 passes from this package was 125.8. Being able to play in 13 is a huge advantage for a run-based offense, because having three tight ends creates additional gaps for the backs.

➜ Coordinator DICK LEBEAU's defense is defined by amoeba fronts (in which most box defenders stand up), and complex five-man blitzes on passing downs. In the secondary LeBeau now prefers man coverage—which is shocking for one of the founders of the zone blitz. That's a gargantuan change for the 79-year-old.

➜ A name to remember: safety KEVIN BYARD. The 2016 third-round pick thrives as a blitzer (especially versus the run) and has shown hints of man coverage ability. The Titans like to play with three safeties, and it will be interesting to see how Byard meshes with free-agent pickup JOHNATHAN CYPRIEN (Jaguars), who has a similar skill set.

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
10–6
2016 RECORD
9–7

SEPT. 10	vs. OAK
SEPT. 17	AT JAC
SEPT. 24	vs. SEA
OCT. 1	AT HOU
OCT. 8	AT MIA
OCT. 16 MONDAY	vs. IND
OCT. 22	AT CLE
	BYE
NOV. 5	vs. BAL
NOV. 12	vs. CIN
NOV. 16 THURSDAY	AT PIT
NOV. 26	AT IND
DEC. 3	vs. HOU
DEC. 10	AT ARI
DEC. 17	AT SF
DEC. 24	vs. LAR
DEC. 31	vs. JAC

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
20	18	19	22	29
				Weakness

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

41 JURRELL CASEY DE
181 DELANIE WALKER TE
225 LOGAN RYAN CB
236 SYLVESTER WILLIAMS NT
251 TAYLOR LEWAN T
280 JACK CONKLIN T
297 MARCUS MARIOTA QB
312 BRIAN ORAKPO OLB
316 KEVIN BYARD FS
336 AVERY WILLIAMSON LB
365 DERRICK MORGAN OLB
377 AUSTIN JOHNSON DE
385 DERRICK HENRY RB
392 DEMARCO MURRAY RB
396 ERIK WALDEN LB

PETER G. AIKEN/GETTY IMAGES (MARIOTA); WESLEY HITT/GETTY IMAGES (CASEY)

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2

"THE TEXANS HAD ARGUABLY THE TOP DEFENSE, AND NOW THEY GET BACK ARGUABLY THE BEST DEFENSIVE PLAYER EVER."

Houston Texans

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
9–7
2016 RECORD
9–7

SEPT. 10 VS. JAC
SEPT. 14 THURSDAY AT CIN
SEPT. 24 AT NE
OCT. 1 VS. TEN
OCT. 8 VS. KC
OCT. 15 VS. CLE
BYE
OCT. 29 AT SEA
NOV. 5 VS. IND
NOV. 12 AT LAR
NOV. 19 VS. ARI
NOV. 27 MONDAY AT BAL
DEC. 3 AT TEN
DEC. 10 VS. SF
DEC. 17 AT JAC
DEC. 25 MONDAY VS. PIT
DEC. 31 AT IND

No one would be surprised if DESHAUN WATSON got on the field as a first-round rookie coming off a national title at Clemson—but we shouldn't expect it. BILL O'BRIEN's offense is not easy to learn. The quarterback is responsible for multiple checks at the line of scrimmage, and many of his reads postsnap are highly contingent on the coverage. The Texans like to run routes, both underneath and downfield, in which the receiver reacts to the position of the safeties. It takes both field-reading acumen and confidence to make those throws. Brock Osweiler couldn't manage it last season. But let's remember that TOM SAVAGE has been in Houston for four years and has a bona fide NFL arm. He has a good shot at starting for all of 2017.

➜ Savage will attempt throws into tight windows, which is important when your top receiver is DEANDRE HOPKINS. The five-year pro lacks the speed, quickness and twitch to consistently separate from defensive backs. But Hopkins compensates with strong hands and body control that make him the best contested-catch artist in football.

➜ The Texans had one of the best defenses in football last season, and now they get back arguably the best defensive player of all time in J.J. WATT. Assistant head coach ROMEO CRENNEL and coordinator MIKE VRABEL are great at using presnap alignments to create favorable matchups for pass rushers. They have three linemen who can't be blocked one-on-one: Watt, JADEVEON CLOWNEY and WHITNEY MERCILUS.

➜ Clowney is a great physical specimen who, at 24, is developing as a player. This will be the year he fully carves out his NFL niche. He's explosive going north-south and east-west, but the catch is, he can only go in one direction at a time. He doesn't have the flexibility to turn his body low and bend around the edge. That's why, in obvious pass-rushing situations, he's better inside than outside.

➜ There may not be a more cohesive secondary than Houston's. Cornerbacks KEVIN JOHNSON, KAREEM JACKSON and JOHNATHAN JOSEPH are all proficient in matchup schemes, and safety ANDRE HAL is a converted corner with great coverage prowess in the middle of the field.

BOB LEVEY/GETTY IMAGES (HOPKINS); TIM WARNER/GETTY IMAGES (CLOWNEY)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
28	27	32	1	11
			Strength	

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

2 J.J. WATT DE
48 JADEVEON CLOWNEY DE
64 WHITNEY MERCILUS OLB
159 DEANDRE HOPKINS WR
196 KEVIN JOHNSON CB
299 KAREEM JACKSON CB
304 JOHNATHAN JOSEPH CB
322 ANDRE HAL FS
337 LAMAR MILLER RB
358 DUANE BROWN T
374 D.J. READER DT

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3

Indianapolis Colts

"THEY NEED TO HAVE LUCK GET RID OF THE BALL MORE QUICKLY WITHOUT TAKING AWAY WHAT MAKES HIM EXCEPTIONAL."

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
8–8
2016 RECORD
8–8

SEPT. 10 AT LAR
SEPT. 17 VS. ARI
SEPT. 24 VS. CLE
OCT. 1 AT SEA
OCT. 8 VS. SF
OCT. 16 MONDAY AT TEN
OCT. 22 VS. JAC
OCT. 29 AT CIN
NOV. 5 AT HOU
NOV. 12 VS. PIT
BYE
NOV. 26 VS. TEN
DEC. 3 AT JAC
DEC. 10 AT BUF
DEC. 14 THURSDAY VS. DEN
DEC. 23 SATURDAY AT BAL
DEC. 31 VS. HOU

No one in the NFL believes ANDREW LUCK is anything less than elite. Luck made more expert-level plays than any quarterback last year, extending plays and finding receivers late. But he also made too many negative plays. Luck can curtail these and help his developing offensive line (plus ward off the injuries that are starting to clutter his "work history") by getting rid of the ball more quickly.

➜ Here's the conundrum for the Colts, though: Luck is at his best when he extends plays. Most quarterbacks go sandlot when they prolong the action, but Luck understands which routes beat which coverages late, and he consistently spots receivers coming open by keeping his eyes downfield and moving within the pocket. His accuracy on tough throws is exceptional. You take these virtues away when you ask him to get rid of the ball sooner. Play-caller ROB CHUDZINSKI must take care to build a quicker passing game that doesn't rob Luck of his greatest strengths.

➜ It will help if Indianapolis's young O-line gets better at protecting Luck. Starters RYAN KELLY (center), JOE HAEG (right guard) and LE'RAVEN CLARK (right tackle) have just 16, 14 and three career starts, respectively, and they showed signs of growth last season: In the second half of the season, the Colts allowed an average of 2.25 fewer sacks per game than in the first.

➜ There are two basic schools of thought on defense. One is to run a simple scheme and allow your guys to play fast. The other is to run a complex scheme and overwhelm opponents mentally. The Colts prefer the former, but it requires an effective four-man pass rush, which they don't have—in fact, they're not even close. Indy's two best edge players, free-agent signees JABAAL SHEARD (Patriots) and JOHN SIMON (Texans), wouldn't even be on the field in passing situations for some teams. But coach CHUCK PAGANO and coordinator TED MONACHINO know how to compensate: Their scheme is heavy in pressure packages and disguises. To play it you need rangy, versatile safeties and corners who can win one-on-one. That's why the Colts drafted Ohio State safety MALIK HOOKER in the first round and Florida corner QUINCY WILSON in the second.

STACY REVERE/GETTY IMAGES (HILTON); SIMON BRUTY (LUCK)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
5	22	27	32	27
			Weakness	

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

30 ANDREW LUCK QB
100 VONTAE DAVIS CB
115 T.Y. HILTON WR
205 JOHNATHAN HANKINS DT
292 JABAAL SHEARD DE
349 JOHN SIMON OLB
356 RYAN KELLY C
360 JOE HAEG T
363 JACK DOYLE TE
368 FRANK GORE RB

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
5–11
2016 RECORD
3–13

SEPT. 10 AT **HOU**
SEPT. 17 VS. **TEN**
SEPT. 24 IN LONDON VS. **BAL**
OCT. 1 AT **NYJ**
OCT. 8 AT **PIT**
OCT. 15 VS. **LAR**
OCT. 22 AT **IND**
BYE
NOV. 5 VS. **CIN**
OCT. 12 VS. **LAC**
NOV. 19 AT **CLE**
NOV. 26 AT **ARI**
DEC. 3 VS. **IND**
DEC. 10 VS. **SEA**
DEC. 17 VS. **HOU**
DEC. 24 AT **SF**
DEC. 31 AT **TEN**

4

"THE SELECTION OF FOURNETTE SHOWS THAT THEY WANT AN OLD-SCHOOL, RUN-FIRST OFFENSE."

Jacksonville Jaguars

ROB FOLDY/GETTY IMAGES (RAMSEY); STEVEN SENNE/AP (FOURNETTE)

There's no nice way to say it: BLAKE BORTLES was awful last year. His mechanics and decision-making regressed. It was hard to believe he was the same quarterback who in 2014 and '15 inspired some to call him a young Ben Roethlisberger. If Bortles struggles again this year he will be on the bench by Halloween. His biggest problem is his throwing motion: It's gotten longer. The longer the motion, the greater the chance of a mechanical glitch. Also, it simply takes more time for the ball to come out—often making what looked like a good decision turn into a bad one.

➜ Even if Bortles reworks his motion, he'll never have the compact delivery of an Aaron Rodgers or a Matthew Stafford. So Jacksonville must run an offense with slower-developing pass routes. (The Buccaneers do this with Jameis Winston.) Naturally, downfield play-action is a heavy component of that kind of offense. Bortles and the Jags were spectacular with that in 2015. They must get back to it.

➜ The selection of LSU running back LEONARD FOURNETTE with the No. 4 pick suggests that DOUG MARRONE, in his first full season as the Jaguars' coach, and new front-office czar Tom Coughlin want an old-school, run-first offense. A lack of athleticism along the interior O-line means Jacksonville's ground game will feature more inside zone than outside zone plays.

➜ With the additions of marquee free agents A.J. BOUYE (cornerback) and CALAIS CAMPBELL (defensive lineman), plus the expected development of second-year men YANNICK NGAKOUE (defensive end), MYLES JACK (middle linebacker) and JALEN RAMSEY (corner), the Jaguars' D could be stacked. The more talent you have, the simpler your scheme can be, and the faster your defenders can play. Defensive coordinator TODD WASH is expected to stick with their Seahawks-style Cover 3, which is about as simple as it gets.

➜ Ramsey is a superstar in the making. At 6' 2" and 208 pounds, he has the best physique of any corner to enter the league recently, and his build is ideal for a Cover 3 boundary cornerback—the Richard Sherman role. Bouye is another rangy corner, and he has great route recognition. It will be difficult to beat Jacksonville on the perimeter.

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
27	16	16	8	8
Weakness				

ANDY BENOIT'S 400 ON.SI.COM/400

35 CALAIS CAMPBELL DE
54 TELVIN SMITH LB
60 A.J. BOUYE CB
153 MALIK JACKSON DT
171 JALEN RAMSEY CB
177 PAUL POSLUSZNY LB
235 ALLEN ROBINSON WR
287 TASHAUN GIPSON FS

1

Oakland Raiders

"LYNCH, WITH TWO EXCELLENT BACKUPS, WILL LIKELY LEAD THE ROTATION AS A FIRST- AND SECOND-DOWN BACK."

Raiders fans, don't get apoplectic when you read this, but DEREK CARR is not the savior of the NFL. He's just an extremely talented 26-year-old quarterback who can run a wide-ranging offense and flick strong, tight-window throws anywhere on the field. MVP-caliber stuff? You bet. But understand: Carr did not play like an MVP last year until Week 8. Before that, he had been inconsistent in his mechanics and decision-making. This is actually good news for the faithful, because it suggests that Carr is in the early stages of his growth, and he could have an even better season in 2017.

➜ What first-time offensive coordinator TODD DOWNING wanted most this offseason was to acquire a tight end who was a true weapon in the passing game. (Incumbent CLIVE WALFORD is a backup.) Downing got that in former Packer JARED COOK.

➜ Remember: MARSHAWN LYNCH last produced like a star running back in 2014. It will be interesting to see how he comes back after a season off. The Raiders have two excellent backups in DEANDRE WASHINGTON and JALEN RICHARD. Most likely the 31-year-old Lynch will lead the rotation as a first- and second-down back.

➜ Overall, the Cowboys have the NFL's best offensive line—by far. The argument is whether Oakland has the best interior offensive line in football. Guards GABE JACKSON and especially KELECHI OSEMELE can displace defensive linemen in the ground game. Center RODNEY HUDSON is alert and technically sound blocking on the move.

➜ The Raiders have perhaps the least appealing group of linebackers in the NFL, so the defense must continue to be aggressive schematically. Raiders DC KEN NORTON JR. would presumably prefer the straightforward zone tactics that he learned as an assistant in Seattle. But that defense is about reading and reacting. Oakland's linebackers would get exposed playing that kind of football.

➜ Instead of significantly addressing their linebacking corps in the offseason Oakland drafted cornerback GAREON CONLEY of Ohio State in the first round and safety OBI MELIFONWU of Connecticut in the second. The better your defensive backfield, the more creative your scheme can be.

KEVIN D. LILES (MACK); DANIEL GLUSKOTER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (LYNCH)

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
10-6
2016 RECORD
12–4

SEPT. 10 AT TEN
SEPT. 17 VS. NYJ
SEPT. 24 AT WAS
OCT. 1 AT DEN
OCT. 8 VS. BAL
OCT. 15 VS. LAC
OCT. 19 THURSDAY VS. KC
OCT. 29 AT BUF
NOV. 5 AT MIA
BYE
NOV. 19 IN MEXICO CITY VS. NE
NOV. 26 VS. DEN
DEC. 3 VS. NYG
DEC. 10 AT KC
DEC. 17 VS. DAL
DEC. 25 MONDAY AT PHI
DEC. 31 AT LAC

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
10	13	3	16	13
		Strength		

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

8 KHALIL MACK DE
66 KELECHI OSEMELE G
102 RODNEY HUDSON C
124 DEREK CARR QB
141 AMARI COOPER WR
144 GABE JACKSON G
179 BRUCE IRVIN OLB
244 JARED COOK TE
245 MICHAEL CRABTREE WR
250 KARL JOSEPH SS
262 DAVID AMERSON CB
283 DONALD PENN T
355 REGGIE NELSON FS

2

"HILL, AS AN EVERY-DOWN PLAYER, COULD FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGE THE MAKEUP OF THEIR OFFENSE."

Kansas City Chiefs

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
10-6
2016 RECORD
12-4

SEPT. 7 THURSDAY AT **NE**
SEPT. 17 VS. **PHI**
SEPT. 24 AT **LAC**
OCT. 2 MONDAY VS. **WAS**
OCT. 8 AT **HOU**
OCT. 15 VS. **PIT**
OCT. 19 THURSDAY AT **OAK**
OCT. 30 MONDAY VS. **DEN**
NOV. 5 AT **DAL**
BYE
NOV. 19 AT **NYG**
NOV. 26 VS. **BUF**
DEC. 3 AT **NYJ**
DEC. 10 VS. **OAK**
DEC. 16 SATURDAY VS. **LAC**
DEC. 24 VS. **MIA**
DEC. 31 AT **DEN**

KEVIN C. COX/GETTY IMAGES (KELCE); JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES (HILL)

The plan is for TYREEK HILL to be an every-down player in 2017. This could fundamentally change the makeup of the Chiefs' offense. The 5' 10", 185-pound Hill can be deployed anywhere as a wide receiver—including on the line by himself on the weak side, a la Dez Bryant or A.J. Green. He's also dangerous in the backfield and even more so on gadget plays, which are a big part of coach ANDY REID's brilliantly schemed, misdirection-based offense.

➜ Kansas City's passing game is unique because it doesn't depend on wide receivers winning one-on-one battles outside. (That's why they released the expensive Jeremy Maclin this offseason.) The scheme relies on route combinations creating opportunities for tight ends and running backs. This means the throws are more about timing than velocity, making caretaker quarterback ALEX SMITH—call him a "point guard QB" if you feel that's more respectful—a fine fit.

➜ The NFL's two best three-tight end packages belong to the Redskins and the Chiefs. What do they have in common? An athletic, refined route runner who can line up anywhere (Washington's Jordan Reed and KC's TRAVIS KELCE), and a No. 2 tight end who can also line up anywhere (Vernon Davis and DEMETRIUS HARRIS). (The third TE tends to stay near the line.) Remove Kelce and the Chiefs' attack is significantly less potent.

➜ No defense that has ever allowed fewer than 20 points a game has given up more yards than the 2016 Chiefs. This speaks to their D's dependency on big plays. Kansas City's 18 interceptions were tied with the Ravens and the Chargers for the league lead. What's incredible is that the Chiefs did this in a matchup-based scheme. When they aren't playing man coverage, they play an assertive matchup zone that often ends up resembling man coverage in its execution. Man-to-man defenders typically don't get many picks because their eyes are on their receiver, not the quarterback or the ball.

➜ Second-year defensive end CHRIS JONES has a chance to be special. His initial quickness and raw strength are tremendous.

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
23	8	9	4	6
			Strength	

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

21 TRAVIS KELCE TE
27 ERIC BERRY SS
39 JUSTIN HOUSTON OLB
53 MARCUS PETERS CB
83 MITCHELL SCHWARTZ T
156 CHRIS JONES DE
157 TYREEK HILL WR
160 DEE FORD OLB
198 BENNIE LOGAN DT
211 SPENCER WARE RB
229 LAURENT DUVERNAY-TARDIF G
276 DERRICK JOHNSON LB
281 TAMBA HALI OLB
286 RON PARKER FS
307 TERRANCE MITCHELL CB
308 MITCH MORSE C
372 ALEX SMITH QB
375 RAKEEM NUNEZ-ROCHES DE
393 ALLEN BAILEY DE

OUT FOR SEASON

3

Los Angeles Chargers

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
7-9
2016 RECORD
5-11

SEPT. 11 MONDAY AT **DEN**
SEPT. 17 VS. **MIA**
SEPT. 24 VS. **KC**
OCT. 1 VS. **PHI**
OCT. 8 AT **NYG**
OCT. 15 AT **OAK**
OCT. 22 VS. **DEN**
OCT. 29 AT **NE**
BYE
NOV. 12 AT **JAC**
NOV. 19 VS. **BUF**
NOV. 23 THURSDAY AT **DAL**
DEC. 3 VS. **CLE**
DEC. 10 VS. **WAS**
DEC. 16 SATURDAY AT **KC**
DEC. 24 AT **NYJ**
DEC. 31 VS. **OAK**

PHILIP RIVERS threw a league-high 21 interceptions last season, but an unusually large number of those were due to wide receiver mistakes. That won't be the case this year with the addition of Clemson first-rounder **MIKE WILLIAMS** (if healthy) and the return of **KEENAN ALLEN** from a torn right ACL. Speedy **TRAVIS BENJAMIN** is back as a movable No. 3 receiver and big-play weapon; fourth-year pro **DONTRELLE INMAN** is one of the league's best route runners and could blossom into a quality starter; and 6' 4", 205-pound **TYRELL WILLIAMS**, while needing refinement, has the size and speed to be a No. 1.

➜ It's clear **MELVIN GORDON** is most comfortable running out of a two-back formation: He settled down in his second season after the Chargers drafted his former Wisconsin fullback, **DEREK WATT**. But over the course of 2016, Gordon also got tougher running out of one-back formations. That's crucial, especially in San Diego's offense.

➜ If the Chargers aren't playing three receivers, they'll use two tight ends—and look good doing it. They have a developing star in second-year pro **HUNTER HENRY** and the savviest of veterans in **ANTONIO GATES**, who is still one of the best at getting open over the middle.

➜ Presumably, new coach **ANTHONY LYNN** wouldn't have hired **GUS BRADLEY** as his defensive coordinator unless he wanted to run a Seahawks-style Cover 3 zone. But you have to wonder about the wisdom of adopting such a relatively basic scheme, given Los Angeles's talent. The Chargers have what every defense covets: a pair of top-flight man-to-man corners in **JASON VERRETT** and **CASEY HAYWARD**, who should enable you to expand—not contract—your blitz packages.

➜ **JOEY BOSA**, with only a dozen games under his belt, is already the third-best edge rusher in the NFL, behind Von Miller and Khalil Mack. (J.J. Watt is more a pure defensive lineman than an edge guy.) Bosa's lateral quickness is incredible. So is his hand strength. And body control. And ability to transition from speed to power. It'll be interesting to see where he lines up. Conventional wisdom says he'll play defensive end. But those in the know suggest that Bosa might see snaps inside as a passing down 3-technique.

"BOSA, WITH ONLY A DOZEN GAMES UNDER HIS BELT, IS ALREADY THE THIRD-BEST EDGE RUSHER IN THE NFL."

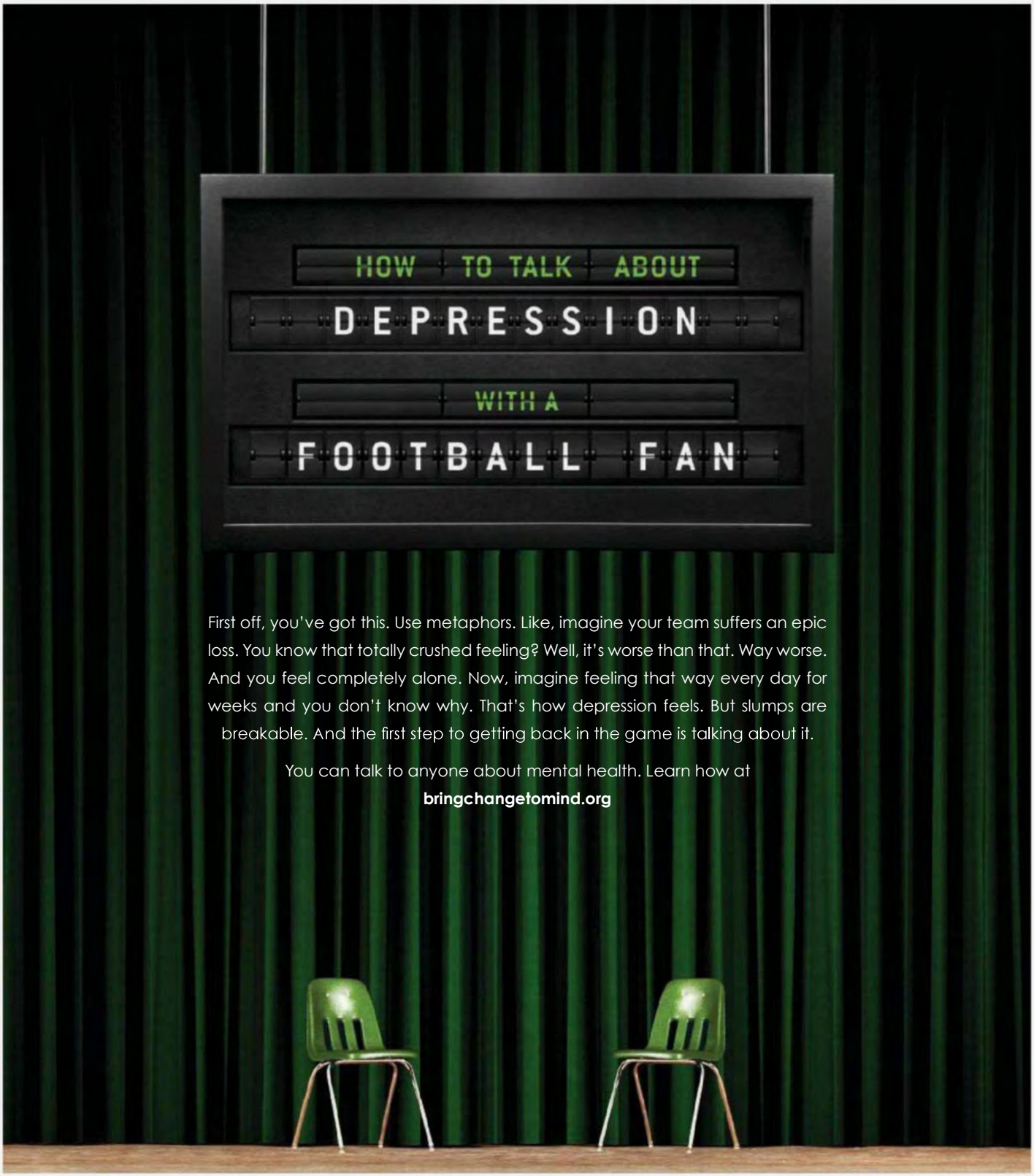
JIM DEDMON/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (RIVERS); PETER READ MILLER/AP (BOSA)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
7	12	24	10	10
Strength				

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

20 JOEY BOSA OLB
67 JASON VERRETT CB
88 PHILIP RIVERS QB
95 MELVIN INGRAM OLB
133 CASEY HAYWARD CB
190 COREY LIUGET DE
199 ANTONIO GATES TE
203 MELVIN GORDON RB
315 HUNTER HENRY TE
317 KEENAN ALLEN WR
379 RUSSELL OKUNG T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bring change to mind

let's talk mental health

4

"IT WON'T MATTER WHO WON THE QUARTERBACK JOB IF THE BRONCOS DON'T RUN THE BALL BETTER."

Denver Broncos

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
6-10
2016 RECORD
9–7

SEPT. 11 MONDAY VS. LAC
SEPT. 17 VS. DAL
SEPT. 24 AT BUF
OCT. 1 VS. OAK
BYE
OCT. 15 VS. NYG
OCT. 22 AT LAC
OCT. 30 MONDAY AT KC
NOV. 5 AT PHI
NOV 12 VS. NE
NOV. 19 VS. CIN
NOV. 26 AT OAK
DEC. 3 AT MIA
DEC. 10 VS. NYJ
DEC. 14 THURSDAY AT IND
DEC. 24 AT WAS
DEC. 31 VS. KC

First-time head coach VANCE JOSEPH should follow Mike Tomlin's example. Before he took the Steelers' job, Tomlin had been an assistant on teams that ran classic 4–3 zone schemes. But the Pittsburgh defense he inherited was coordinated by the legendary Dick LeBeau and stocked with players who fit the franchise's hallmark 3–4 disguised-blitzing attack. So, instead of trying to put his 4–3 stamp on his new club, Tomlin humbly let the D be—and rode it to two Super Bowl appearances in his first four years. Joseph, who most recently coached 4–3 zone-based schemes in Miami and Cincinnati, inherits a Broncos defense that has dominated with man coverage and blitzing. He should let it be.

➜ What stands out about Denver's secondary is how well cornerbacks CHRIS HARRIS, AQIB TALIB and BRADLEY ROBY handle picks and rub routes out of man coverage. That's what carried them to victory in the 2015 AFC championship game, when their tight coverage forced Tom Brady to hold the ball and allowed the pass rush to take over.

➜ It won't matter who won the QB job—TREVOR SIEMIAN, for now—if the Broncos don't run the ball better; they ranked 27th in 2016. Expect more inside rushes under offensive coordinator MIKE MCCOY and new O-line coach JEFF DAVIDSON, as opposed to the outside zone runs preferred by former coach Gary Kubiak.

➜ Like most young quarterbacks, Siemian struggles to process information quickly after the snap. But his upside is that he's tough in the pocket. He keeps his eyes downfield with hits looming and willingly steps into throws. That's a foundation he can build on.

➜ PAXTON LYNCH played only 10 quarters last season—not long enough to render a meaningful judgment on the 2016 first-round pick. But this much is clear: His physical traits are excellent. He has size (6' 7", 244 pounds), mobility and arm strength. He needs to tighten his throwing motion; poor lower-body mechanics caused his throws to lose power and velocity. Addressing this—which won't be easy—would also improve his accuracy. Also, Lynch hasn't shown Siemian's comfort in the pocket, but that's not uncommon for a raw prospect seeing his first NFL action.

RICH GABRIELSON/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (MILLER); ERIC LARS BLAKE/AP (HARRIS)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
24	20	15	3	1
				Strength

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

3 VON MILLER OLB
22 CHRIS HARRIS CB
76 AQIB TALIB CB
78 T.J. WARD SS
109 DEMARYIUS THOMAS WR
150 BRADLEY ROBY CB
161 DEREK WOLFE DE
195 EMMANUEL SANDERS WR
290 BRANDON MARSHALL LB
291 SHANE RAY OLB
333 DARIAN STEWART FS
339 MATT PARADIS C
357 C.J. ANDERSON RB
361 SHAQUIL BARRETT OLB
366 DOMATA PEKO NT

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"WHEN COLLINS IS IN ATTACK MODE, HE'S AS DANGEROUS AS ALMOST ANY DEFENDER IN FOOTBALL."

New York Giants

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
10-6
2016 RECORD
11-5

SEPT. 10 AT DAL
SEPT. 18 MONDAY VS. DET
SEPT. 24 AT PHI
OCT. 1 AT TB
OCT. 8 VS. LAC
OCT. 15 AT DEN
OCT. 22 VS. SEA
BYE
NOV. 5 VS. LAR
NOV. 12 AT SF
NOV. 19 VS. KC
NOV. 23 THURSDAY AT WAS
DEC. 3 AT OAK
DEC. 10 VS. DAL
DEC. 17 VS. PHI
DEC. 24 AT ARI
DEC. 31 VS. WAS

AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES (BECKHAM JR.); AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES (MANNING); EVAN PINKUS/AP (COLLINS)

The first thing you look for every time you put on Giants film: How is their opponent defending ODELL BECKHAM JR.? Or, perhaps more accurately, how is it doubling Beckham? That won't change this season, even with the signing of six-time Pro Bowl receiver BRANDON MARSHALL. Beckham will remain enemy No. 1 for defenses because there isn't a greater big-play threat in football. But the big-bodied Marshall should also thrive in an offense that features slant routes.

➜ New York's ground game, ranked 29th a year ago, must improve, but that won't be easy in its three-receiver offense. Because the Giants have only six run blockers (the O-line and a tight end), they can create fewer gaps and deploy far fewer formations, restricting their rush designs. (On the bright side, they often face fewer defenders in the box.)

Really, New York's ground attack consists of two basic plays, run primarily out of shotgun: inside zone, with double teams right up the gut, and "power," with a pulling guard.

➜ ELI MANNING has always made the occasional boneheaded turnover, but he has more than compensated with his overall play. That said, he had far too many interceptions last year against underneath zone defenders in basic coverages, especially for a quarterback with his experience.

➜ The defense carried this team in 2016. Expect coordinator STEVE SPAGNUOLO to be an even more creative, aggressive play-caller now that he has a better grasp of his personnel. Last season he was learning on the fly about CB JANORIS JENKINS, CB ELI APPLE, DT DAMON HARRISON and DE OLIVIER VERNON (not a bad quartet of newcomers, by the way). Spagnuolo loves to blitz.

➜ One featured blitzer is third-year strong safety LANDON COLLINS, who made first-team All-Pro last year. Collins is not good when he's reacting; he struggles when forced to backpedal, which is why teams go after him in man coverage. But when he's in attack mode, he's as dangerous as almost any defender in football. Spagnuolo has been shrewd in figuring out how to use Collins, who last season responded with five interceptions, four sacks and consistently strong tackling against the run.

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
8	9	23	19	3
				Strength

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

23 ODELL BECKHAM JR. WR
57 OLIVIER VERNON DE
90 JANORIS JENKINS CB
94 DAMON HARRISON DT
104 ELI MANNING QB
118 JASON PIERRE-PAUL DE
146 DOMINIQUE RODGERS-CROMARTIE CB
163 LANDON COLLINS SS
166 BRANDON MARSHALL WR
175 ELI APPLE CB
204 WESTON RICHBURG C
311 JUSTIN PUGH G
369 SHANE VEREEN RB

2

"THE COWBOYS HAVE THE THREE BEST OFFENSIVE LINEMEN IN THE NFL; SMITH IS AS ATHLETIC AS THEY COME."

Dallas Cowboys

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
10-6
2016 RECORD
13-3

SEPT. 10 VS. NYG
SEPT. 17 AT DEN
SEPT. 25 MONDAY AT ARI
OCT. 1 VS. LAR
OCT. 8 VS. GB
BYE
OCT. 22 AT SF
OCT. 29 AT WAS
NOV. 5 VS. KC
NOV. 12 AT ATL
NOV. 19 VS. PHI
NOV. 23 THURSDAY VS. LAC
NOV. 30 THURSDAY VS. WAS
DEC. 10 AT NYG
DEC. 17 AT OAK
DEC. 24 VS. SEA
DEC. 31 AT PHI

The hype about the Dallas offensive line is entirely justified. In fact, not only do the Cowboys have the NFL's best tackle (TYRON SMITH), guard (ZACK MARTIN) and center (TRAVIS FREDERICK), but those men are the league's three best offensive linemen, period. Smith is a superior athlete, and it shows in both pass protection and outside zone blocking. Martin is peerless at blocking while on the move. Frederick's mechanics and initial quickness allow him to beat defensive tackles to a spot, sealing them inside—which is the key to much of Dallas's ground game.

➜ It's possible that the Cowboys will have a fourth elite O-lineman this season: third-year man LA'EL COLLINS, who is moving from left guard to right tackle after the retirement of Doug Free. Collins is a natural at working his run blocks up to the second level.

➜ DAK PRESCOTT had a tremendous rookie campaign, but he played under perfect conditions. He had an O-line that provided clean pockets, a true No. 1 receiver to influence coverages (DEZ BRYANT), two effective underneath possession targets (COLE BEASLEY and JASON WITTEN) and the league's leading rusher (EZEKIEL ELLIOTT). Prescott will have all of that again in 2017—except when Elliott misses games for his conduct suspension. At some point Dallas will have to lean on Prescott to make full-field progression reads and throws under duress. We'll really find out about him when they do.

➜ Defensive coordinator ROD MARINELLI diversifies his coverages just enough to avoid being predictable. The Cowboys don't blitz often, but when they do, it usually involves some sort of gap exchange, with defenders starting in one gap but attacking another. Such maneuvers are also a big part of their regular four-man rush.

➜ When you run as many D-line slants as the Cowboys do, it's imperative that your linebackers have the speed, awareness and technique to scrape outside and cover the area away from the slant. SEAN LEE is great at that. DAMIEN WILSON and JAYLON SMITH are capable as well.

➜ Dallas will be counting on first-round rookie TACO CHARLTON of Michigan. They badly need his speed off the edge.

JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (LEE); RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES (SMITH)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
17	4	1	29	23
		Strength		

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

11 TYRON SMITH T
18 TRAVIS FREDERICK C
24 ZACK MARTIN RG
29 SEAN LEE LB
56 EZEKIEL ELLIOTT RB
73 BYRON JONES FS
75 DEZ BRYANT WR
79 JASON WITTEN TE
223 DAK PRESCOTT QB
233 ORLANDO SCANDRICK CB
240 ANTHONY BROWN CB
348 DEMARCUS LAWRENCE DE
373 TYRONE CRAWFORD DE
390 COLE BEASLEY WR

3

"WITH AN IMPROVED RECEIVING CORPS, WENTZ WILL APPROACH TOP 10 STATUS BEFORE LONG."

Philadelphia Eagles

KYLE ROSS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (COX); JOHN JONES/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (JEFFERY)

CARSON WENTZ has that rare, Roethlisbergerian ability to extend a play without breaking down its structure. We'll see him do that even more in 2017. Last year the Eagles just wanted their rookie QB to make completions, so they called a lot of quick-strike throws, which Wentz, when he was comfortable, executed well. With an expanded understanding of the NFL game and of DOUG PEDERSON's offense, an improved receiving corps and more trust in his line, Wentz will approach top 10 QB status before long.

➜ There's no need to be concerned about how ALSHON JEFFERY, signed from the Bears, will fit in in an offense that is structured around misdirection concepts, quick underneath throws and the occasional downfield route combination. Last season the Eagles asked Dorial Green-Beckham to fill the role that they are now handing to Jeffery. Both receivers have the same rare combination of size and speed, but Jeffery actually knows how to use it. Defenses should be on high alert for dig routes from Jeffery while speedy free-agent pickup TORREY SMITH runs go routes.

➜ Three things to know about Philadelphia's O-line: 1) Right tackle LANE JOHNSON is critical. When he's in—he missed 10 games last year for a performance-enhancing drug suspension—Wentz is much more comfortable; 2) Left tackle JASON PETERS is declining athletically, but the team believes the 35-year-old, three-time All-Pro can gut out at least one more quality season; and 3) Center JASON KELCE is great on the move, but lacks the strength to battle in traffic. Defenses will exploit this by deploying a nosetackle against him.

➜ Philly's defensive line depth and versatility are fantastic. Veteran free-agent pickup CHRIS LONG can be a first- and second-down end, allowing first-round rookie DEREK BARNETT from Tennessee to focus solely on situational pass rushing. Former Raven TIMMY JERNIGAN provides a second interior gap-shooting presence alongside FLETCHER COX. And Cox can actually line up at end sometimes, while BRANDON GRAHAM and VINNY CURRY (both excellent pass rushers) slide inside. The only negative is the loss of tackle Bennie Logan, who signed with the Chiefs. He'll be missed in run defense.

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
8-8
2016 RECORD
7-9

SEPT. 10 AT **WAS**
SEPT. 17 AT **KC**
SEPT. 24 VS. **NYG**
OCT. 1 AT **LAC**
OCT. 8 VS. **ARI**
OCT. 12 THURSDAY AT **CAR**
OCT. 23 MONDAY VS. **WAS**
OCT. 29 VS. **SF**
NOV. 5 VS. **DEN**
BYE
NOV. 19 AT **DAL**
NOV. 26 VS. **CHI**
DEC. 3 AT **SEA**
DEC. 10 AT **LAR**
DEC. 17 AT **NYG**
DEC. 25 MONDAY VS. **OAK**
DEC. 31 VS. **DAL**

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
16	21	12	17	21
				Weakness

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

26 FLETCHER COX DT
84 LANE JOHNSON T
89 ALSHON JEFFERY WR
98 BRANDON GRAHAM DE
110 MALCOLM JENKINS FS
129 RODNEY MCLEOD FS
202 CARSON WENTZ QB
231 VINNY CURRY DE
270 RONALD DARBY CB
284 JASON PETERS T
340 TIMMY JERNIGAN DT
352 DARREN SPROLES RB
359 JORDAN HICKS LB
380 ZACH ERTZ TE
397 BRENT CELEK TE

4

"REPLACING JACKSON AND GARÇON WITH THE STYLISTICALLY DIFFERENT DOCTSON AND PRYOR WILL BE A CHALLENGE."

Washington Redskins

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
7-9
2016 RECORD
8-7-1

SEPT. 10 VS. PHI
SEPT. 17 AT LAR
SEPT. 24 VS. OAK
OCT. 2 MONDAY AT KC
BYE
OCT. 15 VS. SF
OCT. 23 MONDAY AT PHI
OCT. 29 VS. DAL
NOV. 5 AT SEA
NOV. 12 VS. MIN
NOV. 19 AT NO
NOV. 23 THURSDAY VS. NYG
NOV. 30 THURSDAY AT DAL
DEC. 10 AT LAC
DEC. 17 VS. ARI
DEC. 24 VS. DEN
DEC. 31 AT NYG

KIRK COUSINS's performance was up-and-down both early and late in 2016. He didn't always play with great vision and discipline. That's troubling because he doesn't have outstanding arm strength or athleticism, so he can't consistently conjure big plays on his own. What Cousins does have is an understanding of coach JAY GRUDEN's system—which might be the best-crafted in the NFL—as well as a willingness to make tough throws, even when defenders are bearing down. When he plays smartly, that's enough to make Washington's offense go.

➜ DeSean Jackson, who signed with Tampa Bay, was sometimes a headache, and keeping Pierre Garçon would have been expensive, but both receivers will likely be missed in Washington. JOSH DOCTSON, last year's first-round pick, and former Brown TERRELLE PRYOR might be bigger and more talented than Jackson and Garçon, but how do their skill sets fit? Jackson's speed and Garçon's fortitude on in-breaking routes complemented each other, and that factored heavily into how Washington constructed its route combinations.

➜ It's a myth that you must run the ball well in order to execute play-action. It helps, but it's not essential. Last season the Redskins ranked 21st in run offense, and yet their play-action game was once again among the best: According to Football Outsiders, they led the league with 10.4 yards per play-action pass play. Successful play-action starts with cohesive offensive line movement. If you display that, the defense will react accordingly.

➜ Defensive coordinator GREG MANUSKY ultimately wants to run a zone-based scheme, but he needs a much stronger pass rush. That's why the Redskins spent a first-round pick on defensive tackle JONATHAN ALLEN and a second-rounder on outside linebacker RYAN ANDERSON, both from Alabama.

➜ JOSH NORMAN is a superb corner. He's as physical as they come. He has fantastic awareness against receivers at the top of their routes. The concern is speed. Norman's is not lacking, but it may not be quite enough for him to succeed consistently on an island against No. 1 receivers. That's partly why he's better in zone than in man.

JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (WILLIAMS); AL TIELEMANS/AP (PRYOR)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
19	19	4	24	15
		Strength		

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

25 TRENT WILLIAMS T
34 JORDAN REED TE
81 JOSH NORMAN CB
125 BRANDON SCHERFF G
147 RYAN KERRIGAN OLB
185 MORGAN MOSES T
215 TERRELLE PRYOR WR
261 KIRK COUSINS QB
264 JAMISON CROWDER WR

WHAT MAKES A LEGEND?

Brett Favre #4
Nickname "The Gunslinger"
Legendary Quarterback

20	20 NFL Seasons
71,838	71,838 Career Pass Yards, the Most in NFL History
508	508 Career Pass Touchdowns, the 2nd Most in NFL History
297	297 Consecutive Games Started, the Most in NFL History
11	11-Time Pro Bowl Selection
3	3-Time AP Most Valuable Player (1995-1997)
1	1 Super Bowl Championship

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AND SOCKS

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Minnesota Vikings

"BRADFORD, NOT BRIDGEWATER, IS THE QUARTERBACK THEY SHOULD WORRY ABOUT RE-SIGNING AFTER THIS SEASON."

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
11–5
2016 RECORD
8–8

SEPT. 11 MONDAY VS. NO
SEPT. 17 AT PIT
SEPT. 24 VS. TB
OCT. 1 VS. DET
OCT. 9 MONDAY AT CHI
OCT. 15 VS. GB
OCT. 22 VS. BAL
OCT. 29 IN LONDON AT CLE
BYE
NOV. 12 AT WAS
NOV. 19 VS. LAR
NOV. 23 THURSDAY AT DET
DEC. 3 AT ATL
DEC. 10 AT CAR
DEC. 17 VS. CIN
DEC. 23 SATURDAY AT GB

Everyone in the Vikings organization adores TEDDY BRIDGEWATER. And before his horrific left-knee injury last summer, they believed he was their future at quarterback. But here's the cold, hard truth: SAM BRADFORD is markedly better than Bridgewater. Bradford has superior arm strength, accuracy and drop-back timing, and he—not Bridgewater—is the one Minnesota should worry about re-signing after this season.

➜ Did the Vikings overspend for Lions left tackle RILEY REIFF (five years, $26.3 million guaranteed)? Probably. How about Panthers right tackle MIKE REMMERS (five years, $10.5 million guaranteed)? Probably, again. But anyone who watched this team in the second half of last year can't blame them. After three offensive tackles went down and T.J. CLEMMINGS—whose NFL future (if he has one) is as a backup guard—was put back in at left tackle, the passing game was reduced to screens and hasty three-step drop-backs. Bradford & Co. never had a chance.

➜ This will be a three-receiver offense. Minnesota is solid at wideout and, beyond seven-year veteran KYLE RUDOLPH, it has no proven tight ends or fullbacks. Rudolph is a flawed run blocker but a steady inside-aligned receiver who can get open with the right play design.

➜ The Vikings are predominantly a two-high-safety defense. The reason more teams don't use this structure is that it leaves one less body in the box, which hurts against the run. Minnesota, however, has a trio of stingy run stoppers inside: oversized linebacker ANTHONY BARR, athletic linebacker ERIC KENDRICKS and massively underrated nosetackle LINVAL JOSEPH. Defensive ends EVERSON GRIFFEN and DANIELLE HUNTER aren't great edge-setters, but in a two-high scheme they don't need to be. That job falls to either the cornerbacks or the safeties (depending on if it's Cover 2 or Cover 4). Their DBs, especially free safety HARRISON SMITH, are sure tacklers.

➜ Kendricks is a key component of coach MIKE ZIMMER's staple double-A-gap package. It's imperative that the linebackers, who will walk up in the area between guard and center, have the ability to retreat into landmark zone coverage when the blitz is merely a bluff. Kendricks is tremendous here.

DAVID E. KLUTHO (2)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
18	17	20	5	4
				Strength

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

40 HARRISON SMITH SS
87 XAVIER RHODES CB
96 LINVAL JOSEPH DT
121 ANTHONY BARR LB
172 EVERSON GRIFFEN DE
192 DANIELLE HUNTER DE
194 STEFON DIGGS WR
246 ERIC KENDRICKS LB
249 SAM BRADFORD QB
263 ANDREW SENDEJO FS
367 RILEY REIFF T

2

"RODGERS CAN GO AGAINST FUNDAMENTALS AND NOT ONLY AVOID TURNOVERS BUT MAKE SPECTACULAR PLAYS."

Green Bay Packers

AARON RODGERS is a paradox. At times he simply won't look at his primary receiver. He'll also hold the ball unnecessarily. And yet when he goes against these quarterbacking fundamentals, Rodgers doesn't just avoid turnovers—he often makes spectacular plays. Still, the Packers' offense operates better when Rodgers is playing on time and with discipline. He did that down the stretch last season and lit the world on fire.

➜ JORDY NELSON is the perfect receiver for Rodgers. Besides running Green Bay's staple routes—such as slants and posts outside, and deep "over" routes from the slot—Nelson is tremendous on the back-shoulder throws that Rodgers loves, and he has a feel for how to get open when a play breaks down late. This is a big reason that 11 of Nelson's league-leading 14 touchdown receptions last year came in the red zone.

➜ Let's not forget: Rodgers and Nelson can come up with magic late in the play because of their offensive line. No front five was better at sustaining pass protection in 2016—not even Dallas's. The Pack's O-line does have some built-in advantages, though. Instead of blitzing Rodgers, defenses like to drop eight into coverage, which means there are only three defenders to block. Also, Green Bay sees fewer designer pass rush tactics such as stunts and twists; defenses are so concerned with keeping Rodgers in the pocket that they tend to have rushers simply charge straight up the field.

➜ When the Packers drafted cornerback KEVIN KING and safety JOSH JONES in the second round this spring, defensive coordinator DOM CAPERS beamed. That's because Capers, the team's nine-year defensive coordinator, can only run his preferred system when he has cover men he trusts. (Last year he had to play safe, two-high-safety schemes to aid his floundering cornerbacks.)

➜ Capers loves to play "big nickel," even against running formations. He basically replaces a linebacker with a smaller, but more athletic, box safety. Former Packers great Charles Woodson and Micah Hyde (who signed with the Bills this offseason) both prospered in this role. In '17 eight-year veteran MORGAN BURNETT should ably succeed them.

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
11–5
2016 RECORD
10–6

SEPT. 10	vs. SEA
SEPT. 17	at ATL
SEPT. 24	vs. CIN
SEPT. 28 THURSDAY	vs. CHI
OCT. 8	at DAL
OCT. 15	at MIN
OCT. 22	vs. NO
	BYE
NOV. 6 MONDAY	vs. DET
NOV. 12	at CHI
NOV. 19	vs. BAL
NOV. 26	at PIT
DEC. 3	vs. TB
DEC. 10	at CLE
DEC. 17	at CAR
DEC. 23 SATURDAY	vs. MIN
DEC. 31	at DET

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
2	5	5	15	25
Strength				

JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (DANIELS); A.J. MAST (RODGERS)

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

6 AARON RODGERS QB
58 MIKE DANIELS DE
63 DAVID BAKHTIARI T
97 JORDY NELSON WR
143 MARTELLUS BENNETT TE
145 BRYAN BULAGA T
154 CLAY MATTHEWS OLB
180 HA-HA CLINTON-DIX FS
200 MORGAN BURNETT SS
209 RANDALL COBB WR
226 NICK PERRY OLB

3

Chicago Bears

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
6–10
2016 RECORD
3–13

SEP. 10 VS. ATL
SEPT. 17 AT TB
SEPT. 24 VS. PIT
SEPT. 28 THURSDAY AT GB
OCT. 9 MONDAY VS. MIN
OCT. 15 AT BAL
OCT. 22 VS. CAR
OCT. 29 AT NO
BYE
NOV. 12 VS. GB
NOV. 19 VS. DET
NOV. 26 AT PHI
DEC. 3 VS. SF
DEC. 10 AT CIN
DEC. 16 SATURDAY AT DET
DEC. 24 VS. CLE
DEC. 31 AT MIN

"HOWARD CAN BE A SUSTAINING, DEFENDER-DRAGGING BALLCARRIER, AND HE HAS A FEEL FOR TURNING THE CORNER."

It has been nearly three years since MIKE GLENNON started an NFL game, but when last seen with the Buccaneers he had improved at playing with defenders in his face. That's a critical trait for an NFL quarterback, especially a pocket passer who is not particularly mobile. Glennon, who signed a three-year, $45 million deal in March, surely didn't love it when the Bears traded up to draft MITCHELL TRUBISKY of North Carolina. But the 27-year-old will have his opportunities, and if he plays well he'll be a starting QB (somewhere) in 2018.

➜ Who will be the targets for Glennon (or Trubisky)? With Alshon Jeffery gone to Philadelphia, Chicago has no No. 1 receiver. KEVIN WHITE, a '15 first-rounder who was seen as a project out of West Virginia, where he always lined up on the right side, has played just four games in two seasons because of left leg injuries. And when White has been on the field he has looked slow and stiff, though that could be because he wasn't fully healthy.

➜ Second-year back JORDAN HOWARD is the best all-around zone runner in football. He can be a sustaining, defender-dragging ballcarrier on inside zone runs, working behind double teams. And he has a superb feel for turning the corner on outside zone runs, which make up the bulk of the Bears' rushing attack. To play to this, the Bears like to feed Howard on pitches and sweeps.

➜ Eighteen-year NFL defensive coordinator VIC FANGIO, in his third season with Chicago, prefers subtly disguised zone coverages, usually with two safeties deep. That means he can't blitz often, which is why it's important that the Bears have an effective four-man pass rush. LEONARD FLOYD, their first-round pick in '16, has the length and athleticism to become a 15-sack-a-year guy.

➜ If you're a two-high-safety zone defense with decent edge rushers, your defenders naturally have eyes on the quarterback and the ball, making it easier to generate turnovers by jumping routes and going for strip-fumbles after the catch. But the Bears, despite being zone-based, forced 11 turnovers last season, tied for the least in NFL history. If that doesn't improve, Chicago will draft in the top five again in '18.

CLIFF WELCH/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (FLOYD); DANIEL BARTEL/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (HOWARD)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
26	28	13	26	30
				Weakness

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

59 KYLE LONG G
111 JORDAN HOWARD RB
213 AKIEM HICKS DE
214 JOSH SITTON G
232 LEONARD FLOYD OLB
247 WILLIE YOUNG OLB
255 PERNELL MCPHEE OLB
362 JAYE HOWARD DE

4

"IN ABDULLAH AND RIDDICK, THEY HAVE TWO BACKFIELD WEAPONS WHO CAN CREATE THEIR OWN SPACE."

Detroit Lions

Fans like the idea that a physically limited quarterback can succeed with brains and accuracy. He can, but to a much lesser extent than they realize. In the NFL, the stronger a QB's arm, the more throws that are available to him. If you don't believe it, take a close look at the Lions. You'll see an offense that's defined by its quarterback's cannon arm. MATTHEW STAFFORD continues to make the big-time, tight-window passes that he has always made—he's especially deft throwing deep outside against Cover 2—but in coordinator JIM BOB COOTER's system, we've seen the 29-year-old QB play with more maturity. His bold throws are now also good decisions. Cooter has helped Stafford by using straightforward, static formations. The presnap stillness gives Stafford a clearer picture of the defense.

JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (ANSAH); RICK OSENTOSKI/AP (ABDULLAH)

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
5–11
2016 RECORD
9–7

SEPT. 10 VS. ARI
SEPT. 18 MONDAY AT NYG
SEPT. 24 VS. ATL
OCT. 1 AT MIN
OCT. 8 VS. CAR
OCT. 15 AT NO
BYE
OCT. 29 VS. PIT
NOV. 6 MONDAY AT GB
NOV. 12 VS. CLE
NOV. 19 AT CHI
NOV. 23 THURSDAY VS. MIN
DEC. 3 AT BAL
DEC. 10 AT TB
DEC. 16 SATURDAY VS. CHI
DEC. 24 AT CIN
DEC. 31 VS. GB

→ Here's hoping third-year running back AMEER ABDULLAH stays healthy—he went on injured reserve after Week 2 last year with a left Lisfranc injury. With Abdullah and THEO RIDDICK (the best inside receiving back in football), Detroit has two dynamic backfield weapons who can create their own space. Their shifty style of running fits Cooter's single-back spread formations.

→ TAYLOR DECKER tore his right labrum in June, sidelining him for four to six months, and that hurts. The injury to one of the league's best young left tackles—Decker has steady feet and strong hands—leaves the Lions with unappetizing options: reserves COREY ROBINSON and CORNELIUS LUCAS and former Rams bust GREG ROBINSON.

→ Last year opposing offenses completed 72.7% of their passes against Detroit, the highest rate in the NFL's modern era. Surprisingly, the secondary never looked that bad on film. The corners, led by DARIUS SLAY, were solid, and there was depth and versatility at safety. The real problem was that this D rarely made big plays, and that almost always stems from an ineffective pass rush. Indeed, the Lions ranked 30th in sacks.

→ Defensive end ZIGGY ANSAH is worlds better than his two sacks in 2016 suggest. The fifth-year pro, long and athletic, thrives on stunts and twists. Ansah could play at the same level as last season and wind up with 12 sacks.

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
9	23	17	27	26
			Weakness	

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

99 ZIGGY ANSAH DE
117 MATTHEW STAFFORD QB
128 T.J. LANG G
173 DARIUS SLAY CB
183 TAYLOR DECKER T
188 RICK WAGNER T
238 ERIC EBRON TE
253 GOLDEN TATE WR
259 GLOVER QUIN FS
288 MARVIN JONES WR
294 HALOTI NGATA DT
306 THEO RIDDICK RB
343 TAHIR WHITEHEAD LB
344 TAVON WILSON SS
351 KERRY HYDER DE
382 ARMONTY BRYANT DE

OUT FOR SEASON

1

Atlanta Falcons

"BOTH FREEMAN AND COLEMAN ARE TOP 10 BALLCARRIERS WHO CAN SPLIT OUT WIDE AND WIN AS RECEIVERS."

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
12-4
2016 RECORD
11-5

SEPT. 10 AT CHI
SEPT. 17 VS. GB
SEPT. 24 AT DET
OCT. 1 VS. BUF
BYE
OCT. 15 VS. MIA
OCT. 22 AT NE
OCT. 29 AT NYJ
NOV. 5 AT CAR
NOV. 12 VS. DAL
NOV. 20 MONDAY AT SEA
NOV. 26 VS. TB
DEC. 3 VS. MIN
DEC. 7 THURSDAY VS. NO
DEC. 18 MONDAY AT TB
DEC. 24 AT NO
DEC. 31 VS. CAR

The biggest question facing the Falcons is, What will the offense look like under new coordinator STEVE SARKISIAN? In spring there was talk of adding new wrinkles, but doing so is a dangerous game. On the one hand, the fastest way to fall behind in the NFL is to not evolve. On the other, how much do you want to change an offense that last year was one of the greatest in NFL history?

➜ Under OC Kyle Shanahan (now the 49ers' head coach), the Falcons' ground game and aerial attack were in perfect sync. The outside zone run blocking naturally helped sell the play-action game, which Atlanta used a league-high 27% of the time, according to Football Outsiders. This helped turn shrewd field surveyor MATT RYAN into the MVP.

➜ Expect to see TEVIN COLEMAN and DEVONTA FREEMAN on the field together more often. Both are top 10 NFL ballcarriers, and both can split out wide and win as receivers. With both backs out there, defenses will struggle to identify which players to put on the field, let alone what coverage to call.

➜ The Falcons made Super Bowl LI because their young defense improved drastically. After allowing 28.3 points a game before their Week 11 bye, they gave up just 22.0 (including playoffs). The improvements were most apparent in the middle. Rookie linebackers DEION JONES and DE'VONDRE CAMPBELL and rookie strong safety KEANU NEAL were much sharper mentally. Offenses had been attacking them with deep routes by inside receivers; once they figured out how to recognize those plays, the whole D stepped up.

➜ Amazingly, Atlanta's secondary performed better after DESMOND TRUFANT, a top five all-around corner, went down with a torn left pectoral in Week 9. JALEN COLLINS performed well outside, and ROBERT ALFORD traveled with No. 1 receivers all over, including into the slot. In fact, he outplayed Julian Edelman in Super Bowl LI. Collins has been suspended 10 games for a PED violation, but the Falcons still have quality depth with BRIAN POOLE and DEJI OLATOYE. Expect Quinn to call on multiple backups. Last season he increasingly played man coverage and used a four-cornerback dime package.

DAVID E. KLUTHO (JONES); SIMON BRUTY (FREEMAN)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
4	3	7	14	5
	Strength			

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

9 JULIO JONES WR
28 MATT RYAN QB
32 ALEX MACK C
44 DESMOND TRUFANT CB
91 TEVIN COLEMAN RB
92 DEVONTA FREEMAN RB
114 VIC BEASLEY DE
116 JAKE MATTHEWS T
131 RYAN SCHRAEDER T
168 GRADY JARRETT DT
184 ROBERT ALFORD CB
216 KEANU NEAL SS
230 DEION JONES LB
271 DONTARI POE NT
295 JALEN COLLINS CB
399 TAYLOR GABRIEL WR

2

"EXPECT A QUANTUM LEAP FROM WINSTON, WHO IS PLAYING IN AN OFFENSE THAT WILL BRING OUT HIS BEST."

Tampa Bay Buccaneers

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
10–6
2016 RECORD
9–7

SEPT. 10 AT MIA
SEPT. 17 VS. CHI
SEPT. 24 AT MIN
OCT. 1 VS. NYG
OCT. 5 THURSDAY VS. NE
OCT. 15 AT ARI
OCT. 22 AT BUF
OCT. 29 VS. CAR
NOV. 5 AT NO
NOV. 12 VS. NYJ
BYE
NOV. 26 AT ATL
DEC. 3 AT GB
DEC. 10 VS. DET
DEC. 18 MONDAY VS. ATL
DEC. 24 AT CAR
DEC. 31 VS. NO

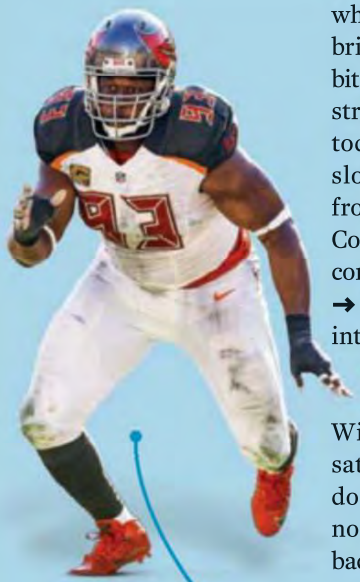
This may not be the year JAMEIS WINSTON becomes a top 10 quarterback, but expect a quantum leap. The Buccaneers understand exactly what Winston is: a smart (potentially brilliant) gunslinger whose release is a bit methodical. He doesn't fit the quick-strike schemes that define so many of today's offenses; he's suited for the slower-developing plays that stem from five- and seven-step dropbacks. Coach DIRK KOETTER's shrewd downfield concepts will bring out Winston's best.

➜ Winston needs to cut down on his interceptions. He threw 15 as a rookie and 18 last year (second only to Philip Rivers for the NFL high). Winston has the talent to compensate with big plays—as Eli Manning does, and Brett Favre did—and he's not simply "mistake-prone" like his backup, RYAN FITZPATRICK. And Winston's turnovers should decline with experience. Many of them are the result of overly aggressive decisions on reads that most young quarterbacks wouldn't even know enough to consider.

➜ Tampa Bay has the three kinds of receivers that teams want in a downfield passing offense: a big wideout who can run corner and post patterns and win with the ball in the air (MIKE EVANS); a speedster who can attack safeties, opening up the intermediate levels (DESEAN JACKSON); and a tight end who can work the seams and run the 5-to-15-yard routes (both first-round rookie O.J. HOWARD of Alabama and incumbent starter CAMERON BRATE).

➜ In the first half of last season the Bucs' defense allowed 29.0 points and 398.9 yards per game. In the second half it surrendered 17.1 points and 337.0 yards. What changed? The players' comfort with coordinator MIKE SMITH's zone concepts. The back seven played with much better spacing and awareness, and Smith, in turn, became more comfortable dialing up coverage disguises. Expect more improvement in 2017.

➜ An effective zone-based D requires a strong four-man pass rush. Aside from signing former Redskins tackle CHRIS BAKER in the offseason, GM Jason Licht did not address this unit. So he is counting on NOAH SPENCE to make even better use of the edge-quickness and second-effort burst that he flashed as a rookie.



JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (MCCOY); SCOTT BOEHM/AP (JACKSON)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
15	11	11	11	17
	Strength			

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

49 GERALD MCCOY DT
70 MIKE EVANS WR
132 DESEAN JACKSON WR
164 JAMEIS WINSTON QB
167 BRENT GRIMES CB
207 LAVONTE DAVID LB
210 CAMERON BRATE TE
217 KWON ALEXANDER LB
218 VERNON HARGREAVES CB
234 ALI MARPET C
252 ROBERT AYERS DE
277 CHRIS BAKER DT
289 DEMAR DOTSON T
321 NOAH SPENCE DE
334 DONOVAN SMITH T
342 WILLIAM GHOLSTON DE

3

Carolina Panthers

"THEIR DRAFT PICKS SUGGEST THEY ARE MAKING CHANGES TO THEIR OFFENSE THAT ARE BOTH RADICAL AND UNNEEDED."

Carolina selected shifty, underneath weapons in the first two rounds of this year's draft: CHRISTIAN MCCAFFREY of Stanford and CURTIS SAMUEL of Ohio State. This suggests that coordinator MIKE SHULA will introduce more quick-strike concepts into their offense—which is like McDonald's deciding to add pizza to its menu. The change is both radical and unnecessary. The Panthers have a run-first offense built for a deep-drop-back passing game; their wide receivers are all big-bodied plodders, not twitchy space-creators; and their offensive line needs the help of additional blockers for those deep drop-backs.

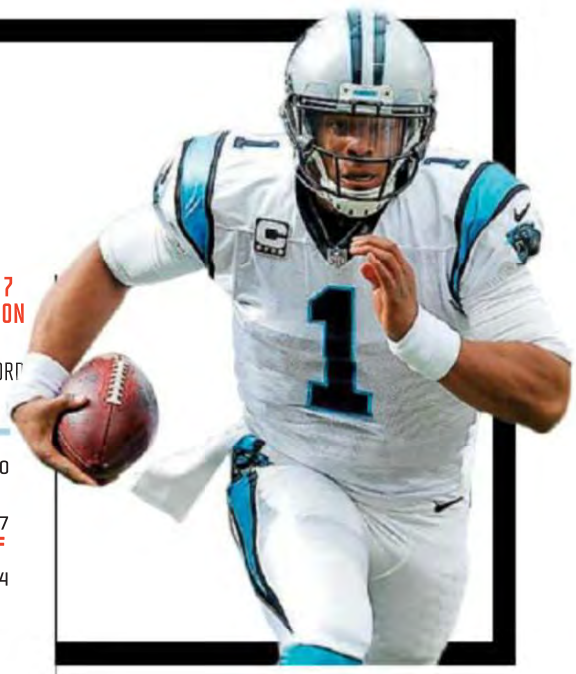
➜ Most important, quick-strike passing is not what CAM NEWTON does. He's not a timing or anticipation passer. Accuracy has never been his strength, and it likely never will be, given how unrefined his mechanics are six years into his career. Newton is a power thrower, which fits best in a deep-drop-back offense.

➜ It would be foolish for the Panthers to limit Newton's rushing attempts, which coach RON RIVERA has said he'd like to do. At 6' 5" and 245 pounds, the mere threat of Newton's running is valuable because it gives the offense a numbers advantage in the box. The running dimension made Newton the league's MVP in 2015. Take that away and you're left with a below-average QB.

➜ Carolina's defense is only as good as its four-man pass rush. When it's clicking, it allows their soft zone coverages to work. When the rush doesn't get to the quarterback, the voids in their coverages become too large. Last season the Panthers averaged 3.8 sacks in wins and 2.4 in losses.

➜ JULIUS PEPPERS is a Hall of Fame defensive end, but entering his 16th season, he's a better interior pass rusher. That's why the Packers played him at nickel defensive tackle last season.

➜ This will be SHAQ THOMPSON's third season, and it's time for him to see more snaps. He's as fast as any linebacker in football, and his coverage abilities are sensational. But he hasn't been able to get on the field much, because LUKE KUECHLY is too great to take out and 34-year-old THOMAS DAVIS isn't slowing down. The plan is for Thompson to assume some of Davis's reps in the nickel package. We'll see.



STREETER LECKA/GETTY IMAGES (KUECHLY); CHRIS KEANE (NEWTON)

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION **7–9**
2016 RECORD 6–10

SEPT. 10	AT SF
SEPT. 17	VS. BUF
SEPT. 24	VS. NO
OCT. 1	AT NE
OCT. 8	AT DET
OCT. 12 THURSDAY	VS. PHIL
OCT. 22	AT CHI
OCT. 29	AT TB
NOV. 5	VS. ATL
NOV. 13 MONDAY	VS. MIA
	BYE
NOV. 26	AT NYJ
DEC. 3	AT NO
DEC. 10	VS. MIN
DEC. 17	VS. GB
DEC. 24	VS. TB
DEC. 31	AT ATL

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
14	15	21	6	31
				Weakness

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

4 LUKE KUECHLY LB	77 KAWANN SHORT DT	267 KELVIN BENJAMIN WR	320 SHAQ THOMPSON LB
42 GREG OLSEN TE	162 CAM NEWTON QB	269 JULIUS PEPPERS OLB	332 MARIO ADDISON DE
65 THOMAS DAVIS LB	248 TRAI TURNER G	296 KURT COLEMAN SS	386 ANDREW NORWELL G
71 RYAN KALIL C	266 STAR LOTULELEI DT	301 JONATHAN STEWART RB	387 CHARLES JOHNSON DE

4

"BREES IS QUARTERBACKING AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL, AND HE'S VITAL TO THEIR BETWEEN-THE-NUMBERS AIR ATTACK."

New Orleans Saints

One of the things that makes DREW BREES great is his ability to manipulate pass defenders with body language. He does this not only with pump fakes but also with shoulder rolls and misleading glances to one side of the field. This is quarterbacking at its highest level, and it is vital for a New Orleans offense that focuses its passing game almost exclusively inside the numbers.

➜ Left tackle TERRON ARMSTEAD will miss part of the season as he recovers from offseason surgery for a torn left labrum. But the Saints can survive, because their scheme naturally helps blockers. For one, no NFC coach last year used formations with six offensive linemen more than SEAN PAYTON, who loves to throw from that personnel grouping. Also, its tight ends and running backs often help with chip blocks. This slows those players as they're getting into their routes, but that's fine because they can serve as check-down options, and Brees's eyes don't reach them until late in the play.

➜ Don't be surprised when ADRIAN PETERSON supplants MARK INGRAM in the running back pecking order. The free-agent pickup is a great fit for New Orleans's north-south ground game, which stylistically resembles the one Peterson thrived in as a Viking.

➜ The defense has been bad for a while, even though the front office has been trying. Every year since 2011 the Saints have spent two of their top three draft picks on defense. The wet-noodle-to-wall approach has left them with a ton of depth—if we're defining depth as highly drafted players who could carve out significant roles but also might provide nothing. Only five starters are proven and locked in: end CAMERON JORDAN, tackle SHELDON RANKINS, cornerback DELVIN BREAUX (if healthy), and safeties KENNY VACCARO and VONN BELL. That's not to say New Orleans is in dire straits at every other position; it's just that those spots are unsettled.

➜ Defensive coordinator DENNIS ALLEN plays with a ton of personnel groupings, front seven alignments and coverage rotations. It's no surprise the Saints drafted cornerback MARSHON LATTIMORE of Ohio State in the first round. The better Allen's corners are in solo coverage, the more creative he can be.

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
6–10
2016 RECORD
7–9

SEPT. 11	MONDAY AT MIN
SEPT. 17	VS. NE
SEPT. 24	AT CAR
OCT. 1	IN LONDON AT MIA
	BYE
OCT. 15	VS. DET
OCT. 22	AT GB
OCT. 29	VS. CHI
NOV. 5	VS. TB
NOV. 12	AT BUF
NOV. 19	VS. WAS
NOV. 26	AT LAR
DEC. 3	VS. CAR
DEC. 7	THURSDAY AT ATL
DEC. 17	VS. NYJ
DEC. 24	VS. ATL
DEC. 31	AT TB

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
6	25	18	30	24
			Weakness	

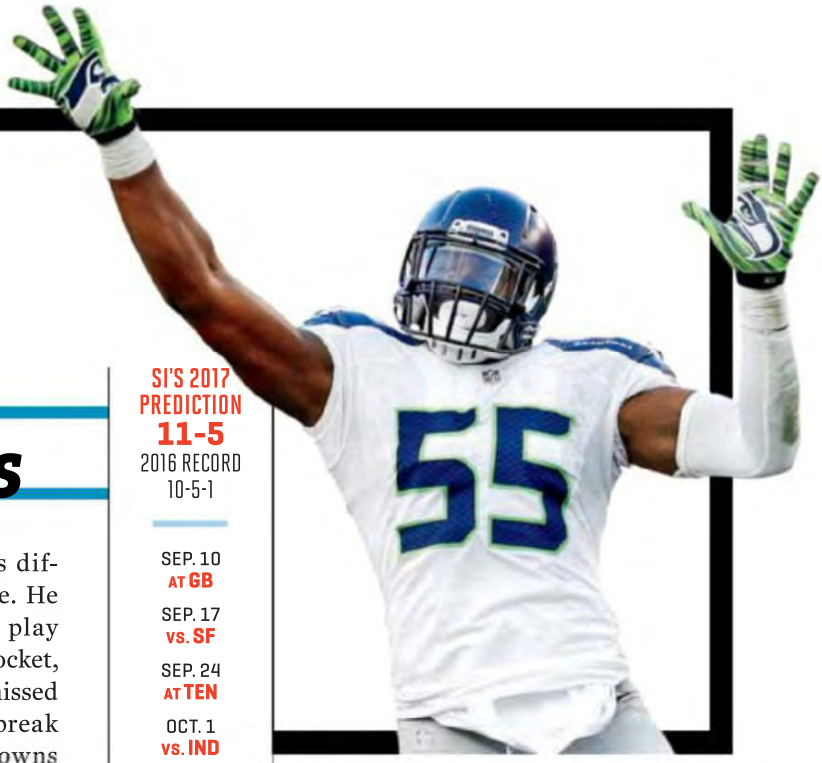
JEFF HAYNES/AP FOR PANINI (BREAUX); JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (BREES)

ANDY BENOIT'S 400 QB
ON.SI.COM/400

37 DREW BREES QB
127 DELVIN BREAUX CB
169 ADRIAN PETERSON RB
176 CAMERON JORDAN DE
222 MARK INGRAM RB
228 MAX UNGER C
237 SHELDON RANKINS DT
260 KENNY VACCARO SS
298 MICHAEL THOMAS WR
318 TERRON ARMSTEAD T
370 VONN BELL FS
371 A.J. KLEIN LB

1

"WILSON IS A GREAT TOUCH THROWER. THAT SAID, IT'S HARD TO BE CONSISTENT WITH A SANDLOT-STYLE QB."



Seattle Seahawks

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
11-5
2016 RECORD
10-5-1

SEP. 10 AT GB
SEP. 17 VS. SF
SEP. 24 AT TEN
OCT. 1 VS. IND
OCT. 8 AT LAR
BYE
OCT. 22 AT NYG
OCT. 29 VS. HOU
NOV. 5 VS. WAS
NOV. 9 THURSDAY AT ARI
NOV. 20 MONDAY VS. ATL
NOV. 26 AT SF
DEC. 3 VS. PHI
DEC. 10 AT JAX
DEC. 17 VS. LAR
DEC. 24 AT DAL
DEC. 31 VS. ARI

RUSSELL WILSON is difficult to analyze. He doesn't always play on time in the pocket, which leads to missed opportunities and plays that break down. But when those breakdowns occur, Wilson can produce results that most quarterbacks couldn't. He's a great touch thrower, particularly on the move, including when he's going left. That said, it's hard to be a consistent team with a sandlot-style QB, and indeed the Seahawks have always been a week-to-week offense. To gain more consistency in the last couple seasons they've emphasized spread formations that demand Wilson get the ball out almost immediately. Wilson, to his immense credit, has responded well. He'll never be a classic drop-back passer, but he's become a much-improved quick-pocket passer.

➜ Seattle's offensive line is as putrid as everyone says it is. Last season the front five struggled mightily against athletic D-lines—a real problem for a team that shares a division with the Rams and the Cardinals. Expect musical chairs up front again this season. The only sure thing is on-the-rise center JUSTIN BRITT.

➜ This defense has changed in the last two seasons under coordinator KRIS RICHARD. It is no longer just a straight Cover 3 zone unit. Richard is a big believer in man-to-man. He'll have RICHARD SHERMAN travel with top receivers, and he plays free safety EARL THOMAS all over, not just in centerfield. It's a fundamentally different D from the ones under Dan Quinn and Gus Bradley.

➜ There isn't a better safety duo than Thomas and KAM CHANCELLOR. They played only seven games together last season because of injury, and in those games the Seahawks allowed an average of 14.3 points and 202.3 passing yards. In the other games Seattle gave up 21.3 points and 244.0 passing yards. The Cover 3, which remains this defense's foundation even if it's used less frequently, works because of those two.

➜ Defensive lineman FRANK CLARK will be a superstar by season's end. The third-year player's initial quickness, change-of-direction agility and closing burst are just too dynamic to ignore.

OTTO GREULE JR./GETTY IMAGES (THOMAS); JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (CLARK)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
12	14	30	2	7
			Strength	

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

12 EARL THOMAS FS
17 MICHAEL BENNETT DE
19 BOBBY WAGNER LB
31 K.J. WRIGHT LB
43 KAM CHANCELLOR SS
46 CLIFF AVRIL DE
72 JIMMY GRAHAM TE
130 RICHARD SHERMAN CB
139 RUSSELL WILSON QB
151 FRANK CLARK DE
170 DOUG BALDWIN WR
364 JUSTIN BRITT C

"WHEN THE OFFENSE GOES TO A FOUR-RECEIVER, ONE-BACK SET, FEW DEFENSES HAVE AN ANSWER."

Arizona Cardinals

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
8-8
2016 RECORD
7-8-1

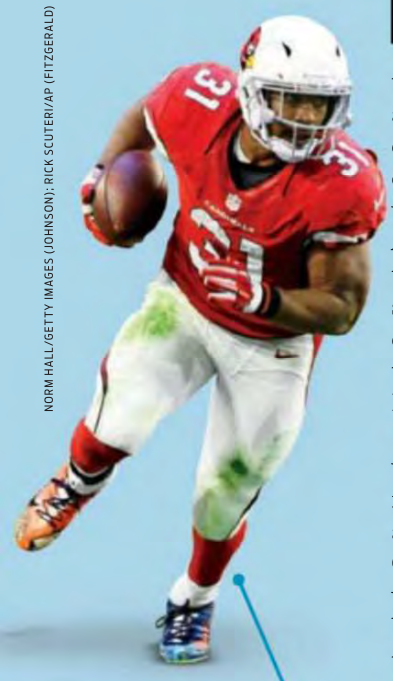
SEPT. 10 AT DET
SEPT. 17 AT IND
SEPT. 25 MONDAY VS. DAL
OCT. 1 VS. SF
OCT. 8 AT PHI
OCT. 15 VS. TB
OCT. 22 IN LONDON AT LAR
BYE
NOV. 5 AT SF
NOV. 9 THURSDAY VS. SEA
NOV. 19 AT HOU
NOV. 26 VS. JAX
DEC. 3 VS. LAR
DEC. 10 VS. TEN
DEC. 17 AT WAS
DEC. 24 VS. NYG
DEC. 31 AT SEA

We can talk CARSON PALMER all we want, but if the Cardinals' offensive line doesn't improve markedly, this team has no chance. Bruce Arians's system features five-step timing drop-backs and often sends out all five eligible receivers, leaving the O-line without any blocking help. Last year Arizona allowed 127 quarterback hits, third most in the league. They've reshuffled their personnel but serious questions remain, including at left tackle, where 2015 first-rounder D.J. Humphries is taking over.

➜ Given that DAVID JOHNSON is, along with Le'Veon Bell, one of the best receiving backs in football (and all-around running backs period), the Cards can really pressure defenses when they go to a four-receiver, one-back set—which they did more often than all but two teams last season. In that formation they have Johnson dictating matchups out wide or in the slot, top-notch possession target LARRY FITZGERALD as a security blanket inside and three sheer speedsters (JARON BROWN, a healthy JOHN BROWN and J.J. NELSON) threatening deep. Few defenses have an answer for all of that.

➜ It's so impressive that Fitzgerald, 34, has cemented his Hall of Fame credentials by becoming the league's best blocking receiver late in his career. Arizona's top running play involves Fitzgerald motioning down behind two line-of-scrimmage tight ends and blocking a second-level defender at the point of attack.

➜ No one noticed because the Cardinals weren't winning last year, but their defense ranked third in net yards allowed per pass attempt (5.7) and also per rush attempt (3.6). It also recorded a league-high 48 sacks. But it will be difficult for Arizona to maintain that level in 2017. Five starters are gone, including emerging star safety Tony Jefferson (Ravens) and domineering defensive lineman Calais Campbell (Jaguars). To restock, the Cardinals brought in a mix of veterans (LB KARLOS DANSBY, SS ANTOINE BETHEA) and rookies (first-round ILB HAASON REDDICK from Temple and FS BUDDA BAKER, a second-rounder from Washington). Incorporating so many new starters into coordinator JAMES BETTCHER's complex scheme could be challenging early on.



NORM HALL/GETTY IMAGES (JOHNSON); RICK SCUTERI/AP (FITZGERALD)

Position Rankings

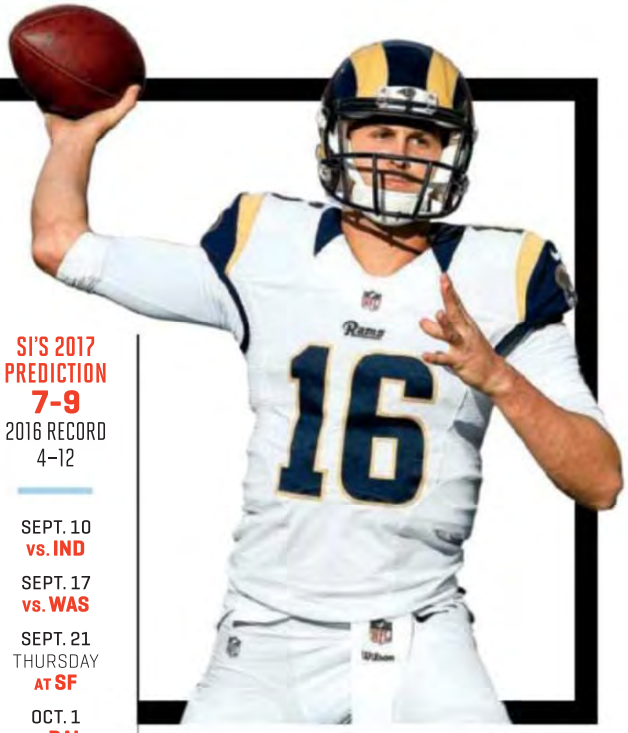
QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
13	6	28	21	12
		Weakness		

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

14. PATRICK PETERSON CB
15. DAVID JOHNSON RB
45. TYRANN MATHIEU FS
103. CHANDLER JONES OLB
108. LARRY FITZGERALD WR
155. CARSON PALMER QB
206. DEONE BUCANNON LB
221. MARKUS GOLDEN OLB
314. MIKE IUPATI G
346. JERMAINE GRESHAM TE
398. ANDRE ELLINGTON RB

3

"GOFF NEEDS TO THROW BETTER THAN HE DID AS A ROOKIE, BUT HE SHOWED A TOUGHNESS THAT IS ENCOURAGING."



Los Angeles Rams

JARED GOFF needs to throw better, plain and simple. As a rookie he was inaccurate on too many routine plays. On passes 11 to 20 yards downfield, his QB rating was 27.9. But here's the positive: Despite getting little help from his offensive line and receivers, Goff showed that he can be tough in the pocket. Early on he tended to take his eyes off his receivers to look at the pass rush, one of the ultimate no-nos, but he grew past that. He knew hits were coming, and he stood firm. That is a critical, encouraging sign.

➜ Running behind a revamped O-line that includes former Bengal ANDREW WHITWORTH at left tackle, Todd Gurley should be better this year. But his poor showing in 2016 wasn't all because of his blocking: Gurley didn't see the field with the same clarity he did as a rookie.

➜ Acquiring SAMMY WATKINS from Buffalo addressed a major need. Before that trade, new coach SEAN MCVAY, the former Redskins offensive coordinator, didn't have a single mismatch-making weapon to build his pass designs around. Some might see TAVON AUSTIN as one, but there's a reason the '13 first-round pick has gained only 410.5 receiving yards a year. Austin can get lazy on deep routes, and as a slot man he hasn't shown the necessary nuance and patience to win underneath. At this point he's a gadget player.

➜ WADE PHILLIPS is as respected as any defensive coordinator in football today (maybe ever), but one quiet criticism you'll hear is that he can be predictable in coverage against untraditional two-receiver formations. In Denver, Phillips's linebackers would get in unfavorable matchups against running backs and tight ends. But Rams linebackers ALEC OGLETREE and MARK BARRON are both ex-college safeties who can run, which means they're better suited for pass coverage than Phillips's Broncos 'backers.

➜ Don't worry about AARON DONALD transitioning to a new position in Phillips's 3–4. The scheme still features 4–3-style, one-gap assignments for most linemen. It will be interesting to see how often Donald aligns at three-technique versus five-technique (the position J.J. Watt played for Phillips in Houston). But Donald's initial burst is too explosive for O-linemen no matter where he sets up.

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
7-9
2016 RECORD
4–12

SEPT. 10 VS. IND
SEPT. 17 VS. WAS
SEPT. 21 THURSDAY AT SF
OCT. 1 AT DAL
OCT. 8 VS. SEA
OCT. 15 AT JAX
OCT. 22 IN LONDON VS. ARI
BYE
NOV. 5 AT NYG
NOV. 12 VS. HOU
NOV. 19 AT MIN
NOV. 26 VS. NO
DEC. 3 AT ARI
DEC. 10 VS. PHI
DEC. 17 AT SEA
DEC. 24 AT TEN
DEC. 31 VS. SF

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
31	30	25	7	20
Weakness				

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

13 AARON DONALD DT
68 ROBERT QUINN DE
82 ANDREW WHITWORTH LT
126 TRUMAINE JOHNSON CB
135 TODD GURLEY RB
140 MICHAEL BROCKERS DT
224 ALEC OGLETREE LB
258 SAMMY WATKINS WR
310 MARK BARRON LB
381 CONNOR BARWIN OLB

KELVIN KUO/AP (DONALD); PAUL SPINELLI/AP (GOFF)

4

"AS LONG AS SHANAHAN'S QB KNOWS WHERE THE BALL SHOULD GO, THEY WILL HAVE A COMPETITIVE OFFENSE."

San Francisco 49ers

SI'S 2017 PREDICTION
4-12
2016 RECORD
2-14

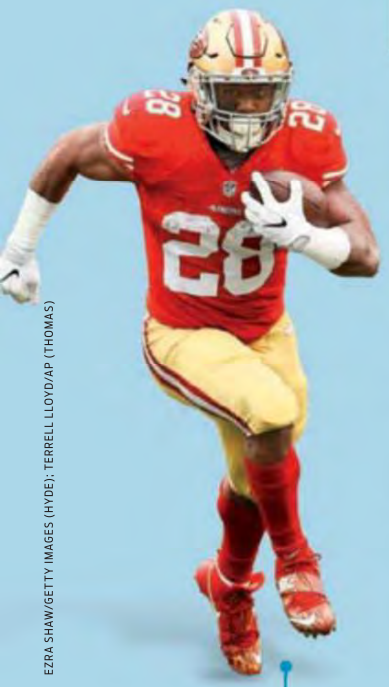
SEPT. 10 VS. CAR
SEPT. 17 AT SEA
SEP. 21 THURSDAY VS. LAR
OCT. 1 AT ARI
OCT. 8 AT IND
OCT. 15 AT WAS
OCT. 22 VS. DAL
OCT. 29 AT PHI
NOV. 5 VS. ARI
NOV. 12 VS. NYG
BYE
NOV. 26 VS. SEA
DEC. 3 AT CHI
DEC. 10 AT HOU
DEC. 17 VS. TEN
DEC. 24 VS. JAX
DEC. 31 AT LAR

When he was the Falcons' offensive coordinator KYLE SHANAHAN, the 49ers' new coach, brilliantly used his formations to create mismatches, often unbalancing the field by having receivers to one side and backs and tight ends to the other. He also excelled at concocting routes for each side of the field that gave Matt Ryan different answers for different coverages. As long as Shanahan has a QB who knows where the ball should go—and BRIAN HOYER, his placeholder starter, usually does—the Niners can field a competitive offense. It won't be as pretty as Atlanta's because they don't have the talent at the skill positions, but it will be more consistent than Chip Kelly's Colin Kaepernick–led attack of a year ago.

➜ What made Shanahan's play designs so potent was the receiving abilities of Falcons tailbacks Devonta Freeman and Tevin Coleman, which allowed them to line up in one formation and shift to another. The shifts forced the defense to tip its hand; also, most D's don't have linebackers who could cover those backs. CARLOS HYDE is a solid inside runner who can occasionally turn the corner, but he had only 163 yards receiving last year. If fourth-round rookie JOE WILLIAMS can become a threat out of the backfield, he'll earn playing time quickly.

➜ Even though he would be among the lightest defensive tackles in the NFL at 273 pounds, that's where No. 3 pick SOLOMON THOMAS should play in passing situations. The 6' 3" Thomas can kick over to end on first and second down, but he lined up at tackle an estimated 85% of his snaps at Stanford. The 49ers' other tackle is 2016 first-rounder—DEFOREST BUCKNER, who showed better leverage in the second half of his rookie season.

➜ New defensive coordinator ROBERT SALEH is a former Seattle assistant, and his Seahawks-style Cover 3 is a single-high safety zone coverage that has interior defenders drop to landmarks on the field. But it's worth noting that last year the teams that used this scheme—Atlanta, Jacksonville and, of course, Seattle—all increased their man-to-man coverage late in the season, perhaps because offenses found ways to exploit the zone. That could signal a problem for the Niners, whose corners may not be good enough to play man regularly.



EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES (HYDE); TERRELL LLOYD/AP (THOMAS)

Position Rankings

QB	SKILL	OL	FRONT 7	DBs
25	29	22	25	28
	Weakness			

ANDY BENOIT'S 400
ON.SI.COM/400

201 JOE STALEY T
220 DEFOREST BUCKNER DT
254 CARLOS HYDE RB
256 JIMMIE WARD DB
265 EARL MITCHELL DT
278 PIERRE GARÇON WR
319 ARIK ARMSTEAD DE
354 NAVORRO BOWMAN LB
378 ELVIS DUMERVIL OLB
389 QUINTON DIAL DE

*HE'S NOT THE FIRST TO TRY IT (DORSETT? O.J.? EMMITT?), BUT **ADRIAN PETERSON** IS LOOKING TO PROVE THAT THERE ARE SECOND ACTS FOR NFL RUNNING BACKS*

ENCORE PERFORMANCE

NFL PREVIEW 2017

The MMQB

ADRIAN PETERSON hasn't had to make a first impression in a locker room in a decade, rare in a business where rosters shift as often as a running back making cuts across the field. But the 11,747 yards he gained in 10 years with the Vikings are far from the only reason the Saints speak of him with awe.

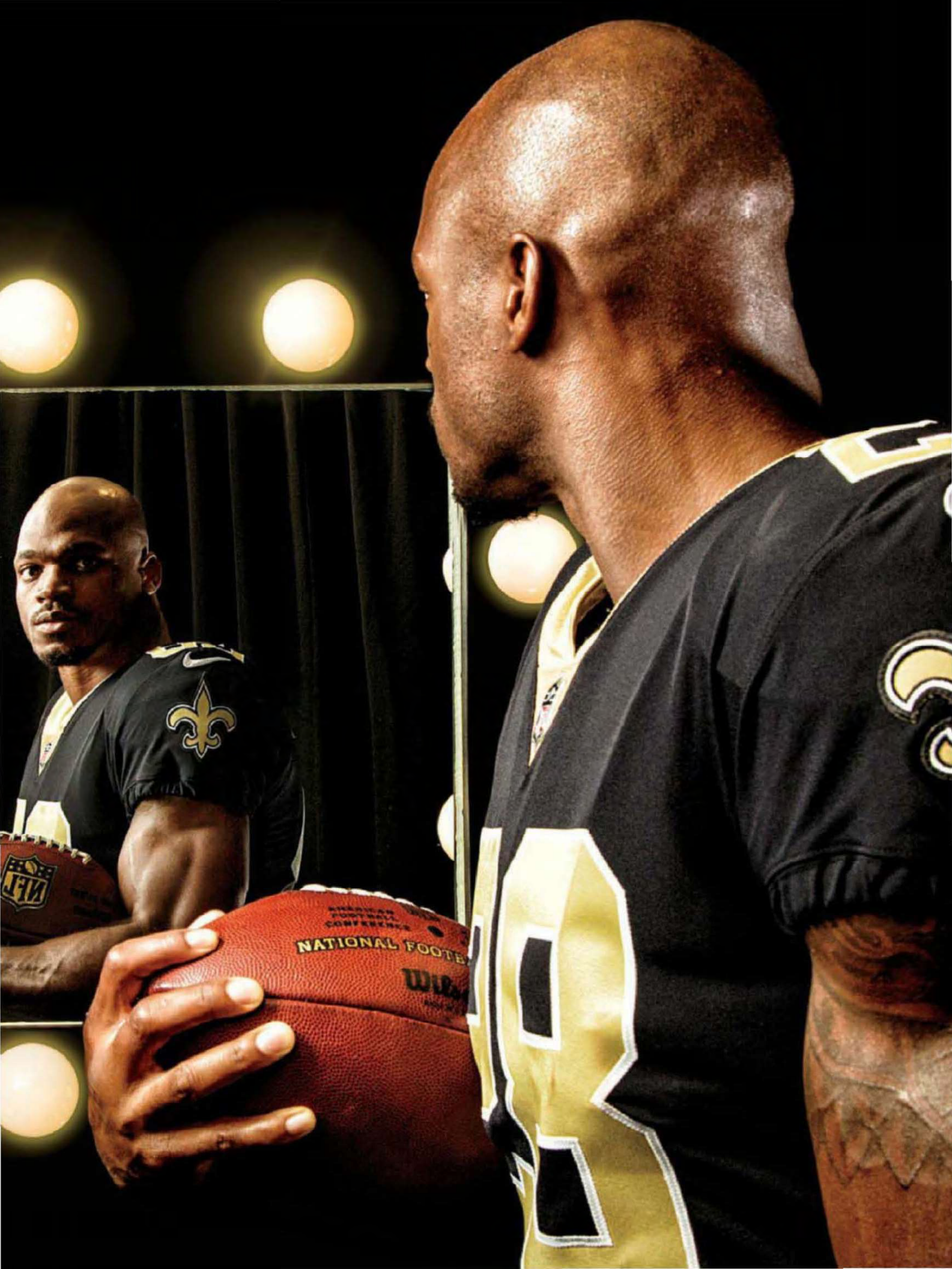
They try to keep up with the 32-year-old Peterson in wind sprints after practice in the oppressive Louisiana heat. They watch as he does one-legged, 48-inch box jumps onto his right knee with cartilage that was repaired less than a year ago. His new coach, Sean Payton, describes Peterson as having a certain "temperament" to his running style, the very same one anyone who's watched the NFL in the last 10 years can recognize—upright and powerful and aggressive, with his knees high and churning.

"There's something about getting a do-over," Peterson says. "Starting over. That right there is kind of refreshing. It revives you."

Peterson in New Orleans, and Marshawn Lynch in Oakland, are on the same mission: As running

BY JENNY VRENTAS

Photograph by MICHAEL J. LE BRECHT II


NATIONAL FOOTB

backs with more than 2,000 NFL carries each to their names, they're trying to prove—with new teams—that their best days aren't behind them. In February, Minnesota declined an $18 million contract option to keep Peterson; Lynch, 31, is making his return after a yearlong retirement from the Seahawks. Raiders coach Jack Del Rio commemorated his comeback by tweeting a practice video of Lynch juking the entire Oakland defense.

For all the optimism surrounding both running backs' rebirths, history offers a cloudier prognosis. For every Marcus Allen, who kept his career going until 37 with a successful five-year, post-Raiders stint in Kansas City, there is a parade of Hall of Fame running backs who had brief and forgettable final acts: Emmitt Smith's two seasons with the Cardinals, Tony Dorsett's year with the Broncos, Thurman Thomas's year with the Dolphins, Franco Harris's eight games with the Seahawks, Eric Dickerson's four games with the Falcons. O.J. Simpson was traded to San Francisco—for the hefty price of five draft choices—long after his juice was gone.

"Marcus Allen is a guy who stands out," Peterson says, "but I haven't really done all the research. I don't like really looking at people that are what they consider 'over the hill,' in the tail end of their careers." In his voice, the disdain for that label is clear. He declares he wants to play five or six more years. To keep himself feeling young, Peterson spends the offseason training with backs who are closer to 20 than 30, including Melvin Gordon, Ty Montgomery and Joe Mixon. "I see what I'm able to do," Peterson says, "and I know I still have it."

It's one of the most intriguing questions of the 2017 NFL season: Can Peterson and Lynch pick up where they left off in Minnesota and Seattle? The stories of those who have attempted to write a new chapter to their careers offer some important clues, as greats of the past share the good, bad and ugly of the running back swan song.

OVER THE HILL
While Allen thrived in Kansas City, Smith (below) wilted in the Arizona desert and Simpson (far right) was a non-factor in two seasons as a Niner.

In his 13th season with the Cowboys, Emmitt Smith passed Walter Payton to become the NFL's all-time leading rusher. A year later he was playing for the Cardinals, who were eager to add a perennial Pro Bowler and three-time Super Bowl champion. Expectations were high after Smith signed a two-year deal to become the face of the lagging franchise. EMMITT MAKES IMPACT IN ARIZONA'S MINICAMP, *read an AP headline.*

Smith: Your stardom doesn't leave. I tell people all the time, change happens. It's not the change that really affects you, it's your *attitude toward the change*. As long as you have the proper attitude, you can manage. It's still football, whether it's in Minnesota or New Orleans, Seattle or Oakland. But you come to realize how much you love the team that you once played for. For me, I came to realize how much my love for this sport was wrapped around the Dallas Cowboys.

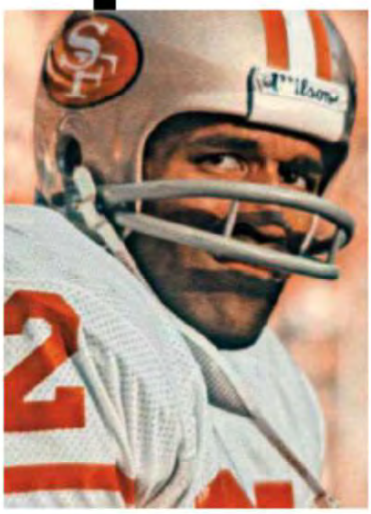
On Oct. 5, 2003, Smith returned to Dallas, only to leave with an injury during the second quarter after rushing for minus-one yard in a loss to his old team.

Smith: It was a heart-wrenching moment when I went back to Texas Stadium to play against my Cowboys. That was difficult, because it was a team that I'll always want to play for. Not being in that Cowboy uniform when I went back was very difficult.

Smith's yards per carry in 2003 was a career-low 2.8. His rushing line in two seasons in Arizona: 357 carries, 1,193 yards, 11 TDs. Smith retired as a member of the Cardinals, but for all intents and purposes he was still a Cowboy. Jerry Jones stood alongside him at his final press conference.

Smith: I would do it again, and the reason why I would do it again is because I was able to have closure and know that my time had come, and my time had gone. It's not that I can't do it anymore. It's *why* am I doing it? I've done everything that I wanted to do. I won three Super Bowls. I became the all-time leading rusher. I've been to Pro Bowls. I've done all these things. . . . What else is left for me to do, outside of get hurt?

BOB ROSATO (SMITH); TIM DEFRISCO (ALLEN)



Like Arizona's signing of Smith, the 49ers brought in 30-year-old O.J. Simpson, who was coming off knee surgery, partly to make a splash. On March 25, 1978, The Washington Post *wrote, "O.J. Simpson struck gold in his hometown of San Francisco yesterday and did not have to run through an airport to get it."*

Eddie DeBartolo Jr. *(49ers owner from 1977 to 2000)*: Joe Thomas was our general manager, and he needed p.r. because he was getting lambasted in San Francisco. He started talking to Buffalo, and he talked me into trading for O.J. I had just come into the league a year earlier, and it was really a giant mistake. O.J. was finished. His knees were gone, and he came to training camp, and he just didn't have it. It was just a bad, bad trade and a mistake. And it was totally done for p.r. purposes.

In his prime, Simpson had picked up more than 2,000 yards in one season; with the 49ers, he needed two seasons to pick up a total of 1,000 yards. In his final NFL game, he carried the ball just twice for 12 yards.

DeBartolo: It's been proven that some running backs change teams and get a new surge, a new lease on life. And some just can't do it because they are out of gas.

Marcus Allen's best season was with the Raiders in 1985, when he amassed 1,759 rushing yards and 2,314 yards from scrimmage, then an NFL record. But his relationship with owner Al Davis soured, perhaps after Allen's five-week contract holdout in '89, and his opportunities diminished.

"YOU COME TO REALIZE HOW MUCH YOU LOVE THE TEAM YOU ONCE PLAYED FOR," SAYS SMITH. "I REALIZED HOW MUCH MY LOVE FOR THIS SPORT WAS WRAPPED AROUND THE COWBOYS."

In a full 16-game season in '92, his last year with the Raiders, he carried the ball just 67 times and aired his grievances to the nation during a Monday Night Football *broadcast. At 33, Allen was free to sign with any team in 1993 as part of the NFL's first free-agent class. He chose Joe Montana's team—the Raiders' greatest rival.*

Carl Peterson *(Chiefs president and general manager from 1989 to 2008)*: We played against [the Raiders] twice a year, and he was standing on the sideline most of the time, next to Art Shell, and that was because Al Davis didn't want him to play. We knew there was still a lot of miles [left in] him. And frankly, one of the reasons he wanted to come to Kansas City was to play against Al twice a year. When I signed him, it was for three years, and he ended up playing five years for us.

He was an extraordinary running back; in his entire career, playing a very precarious position, he never really got [seriously] injured. He brought so much maturity and game preparation. I don't know if I have ever seen a running back prepare like he did. He knew where the defense was going to be on the snap of the ball and had great ability to slide through small holes, jump over the top and, when necessary, go underneath. The best third-down, short-yardage and goal line runner I have ever encountered. Everybody knew he was going to get the ball, but they couldn't stop him.

Allen's biggest seasons were in his early days in L.A., but in his first season in Kansas City, he led the league in touchdowns (12) and the Chiefs went to the AFC championship game. He played until he was 37, leading Kansas City in rushing each year but his last.

Peterson: He's certainly a huge exception. It was unfortunate for him his last couple years with the Raiders, the way they used him—or didn't use him—and it was obviously a plus for us.

The end can come suddenly, as it did for Franco Harris, Tony Dorsett and Thurman Thomas, who each played just one season on their new teams. After rushing for 1,007 yards during the 1983 season, the Steelers abruptly cut Harris on Aug. 20, 1984, to end a contract dispute, just 363 yards short of

RON SACHS/PICTURE-ALLIANCE/DPA/AP (SIMPSON)

pro football's all-time career rushing record. Three weeks later the Seahawks signed him to replace the injured Curt Warner. Harris's stay in Seattle was short lived: On Oct. 30, after he'd rushed for 170 total yards in eight games, the Seahawks released him in what was described as a mutual parting of ways.

Harris: Because of the things that happened, being let go, it was hard to get involved mentally. Physically I felt great, but mentally I just couldn't picture myself in my last year in a Seahawks uniform. I tried to come around, but it was a really difficult time for me. It is a tough game, and it just makes it that much more difficult when you try and talk your way into it. The organization, the coaches, the players—they were all great, and I wish I could have given a lot more. I guess I wasn't ready for that transition.

Dorsett *(played for Cowboys from 1977 to '87 before joining Broncos for what turned out to be his last season; he rushed for 703 yards)*: To this day, I don't even feel like I played for the Broncos. I just remember how strange it was, how I questioned myself many times, Why did I do this? It wasn't, Did I still have it? I didn't question that part of it. It was just questioning, Did they really want me? [He had nine games with 10 carries or fewer.] Then all of a sudden, things go wrong, you get injured, nick this or that, you can't perform like everybody expects you to, the media gets in your face, you're looking at the coaches, they are looking at you a little bit differently. . . . I don't recommend it late in your career. As I've said, many times before, if I had to do it all over again, knowing what I know now, I wouldn't have done it. Finish up where you are.

Thomas *(played for Bills from 1988 to '99, then signed with Dolphins, where he had 136 rushing yards)*: It wasn't all that different because I felt like I could still play. Being released by the Bills, it was not a good feeling. But going down to Miami, I knew those coaches from Oklahoma State, so the transition was very easy for me, even though it was a difficult decision to make. For my family, we were building a house in Orlando, so it made perfect sense for me to go down to Miami. I look back on it, and I would have made the same decision, no matter what. And if I didn't hurt my knee, I probably would have played two or three more years.

ONE AND DONE

After 11 years in Dallas, Dorsett [above right] lasted just one in Denver, while Steelers great Harris, dumped by Pittsburgh after a contract dispute, had just 68 carries in his lone season in Seattle.

Eric Dickerson, who ran for 10,000 yards in less time than anyone in history, was traded three times in his career. The first, in 1987, was a blockbuster, with the Los Angeles Rams sending him to the Colts in a three-team deal. In the summer of '93, the Raiders sent him to the Falcons for a sixth-round draft pick. On Dickerson's first touch in an Atlanta uniform, in a preseason game against Miami, he scored. But things went downhill from there. Coach Jerry Glanville says the doctors discovered Dickerson had an old neck injury, and he was hesitant to play him after that revelation, while Dickerson felt the team preferred to use younger players. He was deactivated for one game against San Francisco; he took a total of three carries in two others. In the middle of October, after a bizarre series of events in which Dickerson thought he'd been cut but hadn't, the Falcons tried to trade him to the Packers. The trade was voided because of the neck injury. On Oct. 21, Dickerson announced he was retiring.

Glanville *(coached Falcons from 1990 to '93)*: I coached against him when he was with the Rams, I coached against him when he was with the Colts, and if you coached against Eric Dickerson when he was with the Rams or the Colts, you had a full-time job trying to stop him. He took a big, long stride, but he could fly. If he got in your secondary, we had a lot of people who just couldn't catch him. When he was at those two places, he was the best back playing.

Dickerson: That last year, I didn't like football anymore. I didn't have a love for the game like when I first played. I still liked it, but I didn't *love* it. I would say, it's the ugly side of football; the business side, how cutthroat it is. That's what I remember most, honestly.

GIN ELLIS/GETTY IMAGES (DORSETT); HEINZ KLUETMEIER (HARRIS)

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FINAL STRETCH
Dickerson's career came to an abrupt end in Atlanta; in 2016, Gore (23) added a ninth 1,000-yard season to his résumé in his first season in Indianapolis.

Some running backs do not fade quietly into the night. Frank Gore had eight 1,000-yard seasons in San Francisco. He had a ninth last season in Indianapolis, at age 33. So much for running backs being over the hill after 30.

Gore *(played for 49ers from 2005 to '14, and for Colts since '15)*: I felt like a rookie again [after signing with Indianapolis]. I was nervous. You are not comfortable anymore. You want to make the organization that brought you in feel that you are that guy they saw, that they heard about, when you come to practice and when you go on the field. That's what I was trying to do.

I was trying to prove to my teammates how much I love the game and to do whatever it took to make plays, and it was hurting me. I had to just relax and be me. Adrian Peterson and Marshawn Lynch, I know that they are going to go in trying to show everybody that they are A.D. All Day, and I'm Beast Mode. Sometimes you catch yourself pressing. They've just got to be them, the great ballplayers they are, and they'll be good.

LaDainian Tomlinson had been the 2006 MVP and had won the NFL rushing title twice in the previous four years when he was cut by the Chargers in the winter of '10. When deciding whether to sign the then 30-year-old, Jets coaches scoured film from his final seasons in San Diego. There's an old adage with veteran players—Payton has used it when talking about Peterson—that while you don't have to see "it" all the time, you do have to see "it." Anthony Lynn, the current Chargers coach who was then the Jets running backs coach, needed to make sure Tomlinson still showed "it" before they would sign him.

Lynn: I had to go through a lot of games to conclude that he still had it. But once I see you make a hard cut and show burst and acceleration through the line of scrimmage, I know you can do it again. When elite players get toward the end of their careers, they may lose a step and their teams don't value them the way they used to, but then you send them somewhere else and it lights a real fire. I like to get backs like that. You can be in one place for so long, think you are motivated and inspired, but you've gotten comfortable. Your team lets you go, and that wakes you up. Usually, your next team gets a good two years.

Tomlinson didn't put up the same sort of numbers in New York as he had in San Diego, but he was a key piece of the offense for two more years. Jets coaches envisioned him having a complementary role, but Tomlinson became a starter that first season, contributing more than 1,200 all-purpose yards.

Tomlinson: That was an important part of my career, because even then, I had to prove to myself that I was still good enough, and I'm sure I had to prove it to them. They probably looked at me when I first got there, [thinking] he is going to be the third-down guy, but I think they quickly saw, This is a guy who can still play.

During Hall of Fame weekend in August, Tomlinson named Peterson as a future Hall of Famer and Lynch as being on the cusp. A great season this year, Tomlinson suggested, could push Lynch over the edge.

Tomlinson: Those guys are veterans. They know about putting their head down and going to work, earning the respect of everybody in that organization, including the coaches. That's what you have to do. When you go there, there is probably this perception of you already from an outside perspective, because they haven't been around you. But it's about creating realistic expectations for who you are going to be for that team. That's what they need to do. Now maybe Adrian Peterson is not going to be who he was for the Minnesota Vikings, and I don't think the Saints expect that, but at some point I think there has to be a realistic expectation for him and for that organization of what he is going to bring to that team. For Adrian, he has to come to the realization that this is where he is in his career, and embrace it. Embrace it. □

NFL PHOTOS/AP (DICKERSON); ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES (GORE)

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OUT OF OPTIONS

FIVE YEARS AGO THE READ-OPTION WAS THE ***OFFENSE OF THE FUTURE****. NOW IT'S AN AFTERTHOUGHT. WHY DID IT FALL OUT OF FAVOR?*

THE IDEA, in the minds of the Titans' coaches, was to build on the zone-read option concepts that helped make quarterback Vince Young a star at Texas. After all, if Tennessee was going to move the ball, while also getting its young field general the game reps he needed, it would need to be creative; making Young into a reliable drop-back passer would be a long work in progress.

Young's people had other ideas.

"Vince's agent refused to let us use it because of the injury factor," says Norm Chow, the Titans' offensive coordinator for Young's first two NFL seasons. "When Jeff Fisher came to me, I said, 'Coach, you gotta be kidding me.' I was flabbergasted. We had no chance, unless we utilized his skill."

For decades, conventional wisdom was that the option would never work in pro football. And then, starting with Young in 2006 and peaking a half decade later, option offenses not only worked but also thrived, highlighting the dynamic gifts of quarterbacks who had

NFL PREVIEW 2017

The MMQB

BY ALBERT BREER

Photo illustration by SI PREMEDIA

CHRIS KEANE (WILSON); MARK REIS/COLORADO SPRINGS GAZETTE/MCT/GETTY IMAGES (TEBOW CHEERING); DAVID E. KLUTHO (KAEPERNICK HANDING OFF); PETER READ MILLER (TEBOW RUNNING); SIMON BRUTY (GRIFFIN); JIM DEDMON/CAL SPORT MEDIA (NEWTON); SIMON BRUTY (KAEPERNICK RUNNING); MIKE EHRMANN/GETTY IMAGES (YOUNG); JOHN BIEVER; ABBY NICOLAS (BACKGROUND)

become household names at the college level: Tim Tebow, Robert Griffin III, Cam Newton and, yes, Colin Kaepernick. It seemed an offense for the 21st century had arrived.

In the wake of the request from Young's camp, the Titans curtailed his role as a runner, but their implementation of the zone-read proved the high point of Young's professional career. Chow was right to insulate him schematically—Young wasn't ready to run a traditional pro-style offense then, or ever. He lasted only six NFL seasons, making 22 starts in his final four years after making 29, including one in the playoffs, over his first two.

As the stories of Young and others over the past decade illustrate, the option's place in the NFL has always been complicated by the flexibility of modern defenses and the importance and economics of the quarterback position.

COLLEGIATE STARS like Tommie Frazier and Scott Frost, national-title winning QBs at Nebraska in the 1990s, never got a shot in the NFL, shut out due to doubts about the option's viability in the pros. But one thing that has always worked in the option's favor is simple math: Making the quarterback part of a run play turns what had been a 10-on-11 game into 11-on-11.

Among the NFL's issues with running the wishbone that Darrell Royal pioneered at Texas, or the triple-option Nebraska mastered under Tom Osborne: The quarterback took snaps from under center. "The problem at the pro level," says longtime NFL coach Mike Shanahan, "is that the defensive linemen are so strong and sturdy, you could never run the option a yard removed from the line of scrimmage." The solution came from college coaches such as Chip Kelly, Urban Meyer and Rich Rodriguez, who in the late 1990s and early 2000s began running the zone-read out of the shotgun and spread sets.

Still, even though that tweak helped give quarterbacks more room to operate, NFL teams were reluctant to risk the health of, often, the most important and most well-compensated player on the roster. That's why the Wildcat came first. It was a way of implementing creative, defense-stressing concepts without putting the franchise in harm's way.

The Dolphins' version grabbed headlines when running backs Ronnie Brown and Ricky Williams carved up the Patriots for 211 rushing yards in Week 3 of 2008. But the truth is, they weren't the first to do it. The Panthers had the "Memphis" and "Tiger" formations behind DeAngelo Williams (who'd run it at Memphis) and Jonathan Stewart (an option back for Kelly at Oregon). And the Browns had the "Flash" for former Kent State QB and return specialist Josh Cribbs. Those packages helped pave the way for the read-option.

"[The Wildcat] worked for a minute," Bears coach John Fox says. "When you started getting more athletic quarterbacks, you could just implement it [full-time]. The line blocked the same, the extra blocker blocked the same. And then teams [were running the Wildcat] with their quarterback."

Meanwhile, the college football pipeline was bursting with passers from spread offenses. Unlike the smallish option QBs of the past, these prospects had pro-style size and arm strength. Alex Smith was the top pick in 2005, Young went No. 3 in '06 and Tebow was the 25th choice in '10. And in 2011 there was an explosion: Five quarterbacks from spread offenses with option elements (Newton, Jake Locker, Blaine Gabbert, Andy Dalton and Kaepernick) went in the first 36 picks. A year later Washington took Griffin second overall. It was a trickle-up effect: As the scheme began to yield top quarterback prospects, NFL offenses began borrowing more heavily from the college game.

EARLY ADAPTORS
Fisher (below) and his staff guided Young through his ups and downs in Tennessee after the Wildcat's success in Miami with Williams (far right, 34) and Brown (23), and before Kaepernick's brilliant two-year stretch running the 49ers.

JEFFREY PHELPS/AP (KAEPERNICK); BOB ROSATO (YOUNG AND FISHER); JOE MURPHY/GETTY IMAGES (YOUNG)

TEBOW'S FIRST start in 2011 came in Week 5 at Miami, and it took 3½ quarters for concerns about his readiness to arise. The Broncos trailed 15–0, and Tebow was 4 of 14 for 40 yards. Broncos p.r. chief Patrick Smyth texted the team's new football czar, John Elway: "FYI, we have the second-longest scoring streak in NFL history entering today."

Little did they know a furious comeback that day would end in an 18–15 Denver win, launch #Tebowmania and turn Fox's staff room into a think tank. The Broncos got blown out the next week by the Lions, but the week after that, in Oakland, a few big first-half option plays led to more in the second half. Denver wound up with 299 yards rushing, then a week later went for 244 at Kansas City. The offensive staff scrambled for ideas to keep the momentum going.

"[Line coach] Dave Magazu, I remember him bringing his Boston College playbook," says Adam Gase, now the Dolphins' coach and then Denver's quarterbacks coach. "I started watching tons of West Virginia, Navy, Air Force. I mean, I'm watching triple-option, I'm watching this old stuff. I call [Tebow's coach at Florida] Urban Meyer at one point and say, 'Give me Tim's three favorite passes, what would you call in a critical situation?' And he gave me those. We got in this mode where we'd try anything."

It didn't last. Detroit's successful strategy that October—putting an eighth man in the box to cover Tebow as a runner and using softer, off coverage to exploit his inaccuracy and elongated delivery as a passer—was copied by New England, Buffalo and K.C. in December, leading to a season-ending three-game losing streak. The Broncos still backed into the AFC West title; for the playoff opener against Pittsburgh they had a plan (later scrapped) to have Brady Quinn replace Tebow in third-and-long situations.

"We literally had a separate game plan for third down," says Quinn. The problem, as Quinn recalls, was that while the option caused conflicts for defenses in the run game, Tebow's shortcomings as a passer prevented them from beating opponents through the air. As a result, Quinn says, "We were awful on third down." The other issue: Denver's defense needed to be great; the Broncos couldn't allow an opponent to jump out to a lead and force them to pass. "We were like Navy," says Gase. "If we got behind, we were in trouble."

Denver beat Pittsburgh on wild-card weekend, with Tebow throwing for 316 yards thanks to a plethora of big plays—he was 10 for 21 that game. A week later he went 9 for 26 for 136 yards in Foxborough, a 45–10 loss to the Patriots.

A larger point was made in the process: There was only so far the option alone could take a team. It could buy a quarterback time to develop as a passer. But eventually he needed to do that; Tebow didn't. The Broncos signed Peyton Manning before the 2012 season, and Tebow never started another game as a quarterback.

UNLIKE THE SMALLISH OPTION QBS OF THE PAST, THESE PROSPECTS HAD PRO-STYLE SIZE AND ARM STRENGTH.

During the '11 season the Panthers were also drawing up a blueprint for Newton, the No. 1 pick. Carolina used the option and their rookie's off-the-charts athleticism in the run game to force defenses to play straight-forward, simplified coverages, making life easier for offensive coordinator Chudzinski and his quarterback. And Newton could cash those checks with his arm in a way that Tebow couldn't.

"You utilize his ability and talent that way," Chudzinski says of Newton. "And in the process, also transition him. It really was a combination of how special we thought he was, and then, 'What can we do offensively to give him time to adjust and to get him time to develop as a passer in a traditional pro-style system?' "

SCOTT CUNNINGHAM/GETTY IMAGES (WILLIAMS); JIM ROGASH/GETTY IMAGES (BROWN)

The other thing that didn't hurt: Newton's 6' 5", 260-pound frame allowed him to take a pounding that many other quarterbacks couldn't endure.

THOUGH AN agent instructing a coach about play-calling certainly qualifies as a faux pas in the NFL, Young's people did have a point. The biggest problem with the option is that teams can't afford to have their triggermen taking extra hits.

That's why Kelly's rules for his quarterbacks went like this: touchdown, first down, get down. In other words, if you can score, go; if you can get to the sticks, go; otherwise, hit the deck. Chargers coach Anthony Lynn held Buffalo's offensive coordinator job for most of 2016. His guidelines for Tyrod Taylor, who rushed for more yards (1,148) than any NFL quarterback over the last two seasons, were even simpler: "Get down, get down, get all you can and get down," he says with a smile.

During his comet-across-the-sky rookie season, in 2012, Griffin tweaked his right knee in Week 14 and sat out the following Sunday's game in Cleveland. Kirk Cousins stepped in and threw for 329 yards. What struck Griffin's family that game was how the Redskins' coaches relied on Cousins's arm rather than his legs.

Like Young's agents, Griffin's relatives envisioned him as a drop-back passer. And so seeing Cousins line up under center and throw—even though he ran many of the same plays Griffin had, just dressed up differently—prompted a call to ownership, who ordered coaches to stop risking Griffin in the run game. Griffin blew out his knee and needed surgery on his ACL and LCL three weeks later. Shanahan was fired one season after that.

What happened in between illustrates how the development of these quarterbacks was complicated by their early success.

A rehabbing Griffin became the toast of D.C., his return expected to ring in a new era of Redskins football. There was nothing the team's staff, who knew how far Griffin had to go, could do to contain the hype, but his circumstances were changing.

Defenses were catching up in the game of cat and mouse. For instance, some started sending the unblocked defender crashing down the line to take out the back, with a linebacker scraping outside behind him assigned to the quarterback. Others chose simply to knock the quarterback (who is not protected by roughing the passer rules when running the option) into Tuesday whether he kept the ball or not.

And, because of his knee injury, Griffin wouldn't be able to run it as much or in the same way as he had in 2012, which put him in the position of having to be what he and his family desired him to be: a more traditional quarterback.

"We knew we could implement [the option] with Robert," Shanahan says. "What we didn't know was how long it would take him to learn the drop-back passing game, because he'd never done it. We knew it'd take time, just like it always does. And a lot of it has to do with how a person wants to study it, wants to be involved with it."

It was difficult for Griffin, after his '12 heroics, to grasp how difficult the path ahead would be. And as he struggled through a coaching change Cousins lapped him developmentally, which contributed to his 2015 benching and '16 release. An injury in the opener effectively ended his '16 season in Cleveland, and he's now out of football.

Meanwhile, in a similar way, Kaepernick's 2012 and '13 stardom for the 49ers hid his need for similar incremental progress. During the Jim Harbaugh era in San Francisco, Kaepernick was surrounded by a running back, offensive line and defense that were among the NFL's best, insulating him from the sorts of third-and-long situations and big deficits that once felled Tebow's Broncos.

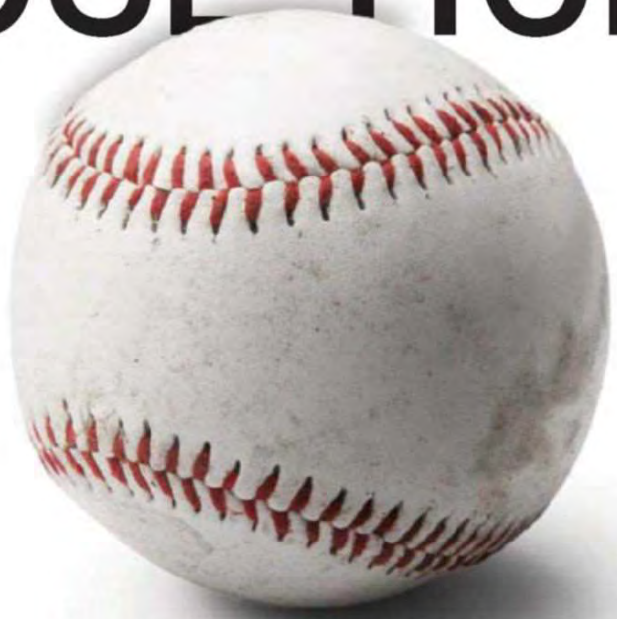
What those on the outside saw: Kaepernick took Alex Smith's job in mid-2012, posted a 98.3 passer rating, had a transcendent playoff game against the Packers (263 yards passing, 181 rushing) and got

A RACE AGAINST TIM

Despite a playoff win, the Denver coaches knew that the run-heavy approach they had to use with Tebow [15] could take them only so far.

ROBERT BECK

THOSE TICKETS



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the Niners to within a few yards of a championship. He followed that with another solid season.

What those on the inside knew: Kaepernick had a long way to go, since the coaches built complexity into the option run game rather than building it into the passing game. That led to big plays on the ground, with defenses trying to catch up to coordinator Greg Roman's run concepts, and more manageable situational football. And when defenses became more adept at stopping the option, Kaepernick's fortunes shifted.

Another problem: Kaepernick was playing for a contender, and the best way for the Niners to keep winning was to continue using him the way they had. By 2014 the team was 8–8 and

RG3 AND OUT
The toast of Washington after an electrifying rookie year, Griffin couldn't handle the physical pounding, then never adjusted to playing from the pocket.

Harbaugh was on his way out. And as the option began to yield fewer 70-yard runs and more seven-yarders across the league, teams relied on it less and less. That, in turn, meant fewer suitors for quarterbacks who once majored in it.

GRIFFIN, TEBOW and (while there are other factors at play) Kaepernick, once seen as potential stars, are out of football. But contrary to popular belief, the option is not dead. Per Pro Football Focus data, NFL teams ran 2,022 plays classified as read-option in 2016 for 8,884 yards and 63 touchdowns. Clearly it still has its place.

"It really just depends on what your personnel is," says Kelly. "Obviously, if you have Cam or RG3 or Kap or Russell Wilson—Blaine Gabbert did a nice job for us on it last year—it's another tool in your toolbox. It's not something you feature all the time but it's something you can make the defense spend more time on."

When Saints coach Sean Payton studied the Bills' offense last year, he saw the side benefits of involving the quarterback in the run game "because it can reduce what you see defensively. When you watch Buffalo offensive film, man, you're getting a similar look [on defense every week], because [the option is] something you have to contend with."

Yes, the explosion early on was, in part, due to defenses scrambling to catch up to it. (Bill Belichick called Nick Saban for help the day after Miami sprung the Wildcat.) But it is now most effective as a changeup pitch. "It's not like it's a gimmick or some sort of thing that can't last or you can't continue to do," Chudzinski says. "[Defenses] definitely know how to play it better, and have learned to play it better. But it's sound."

One of the NFL's elite teams has been at its forefront over the past five seasons. "The team that does it best is Seattle with Russell [Wilson]," Kelly says. "You always have to be conscious of it. They're not gonna run it a ton. He's as good as I've ever seen at not taking the hit. There's nothing more frustrating than the quarterback out in the open field, then he hook slides after the first down, flips the ball to the official and lines back up again. You just can't get to him."

Wilson played through ankle, knee and pectoral injuries for most of 2016, logging only 17 keepers on zone-read plays as a result. Yet, the Seahawks persevered. Wilson persevered. They won a postseason game for the fifth straight year.

And perhaps the success Seattle has had over Wilson's five seasons is due to the simple fact that it didn't use the option as a starting point with the young QB. Wilson's background coming into the NFL was pro-style rather than spread. That gave him other tools in his toolbox to reach for when he lost the metaphorical wrench he and Seattle were so apt at throwing at defenses.

In short: The option is part of what Wilson can do; it's not who he, or Seattle, is. □

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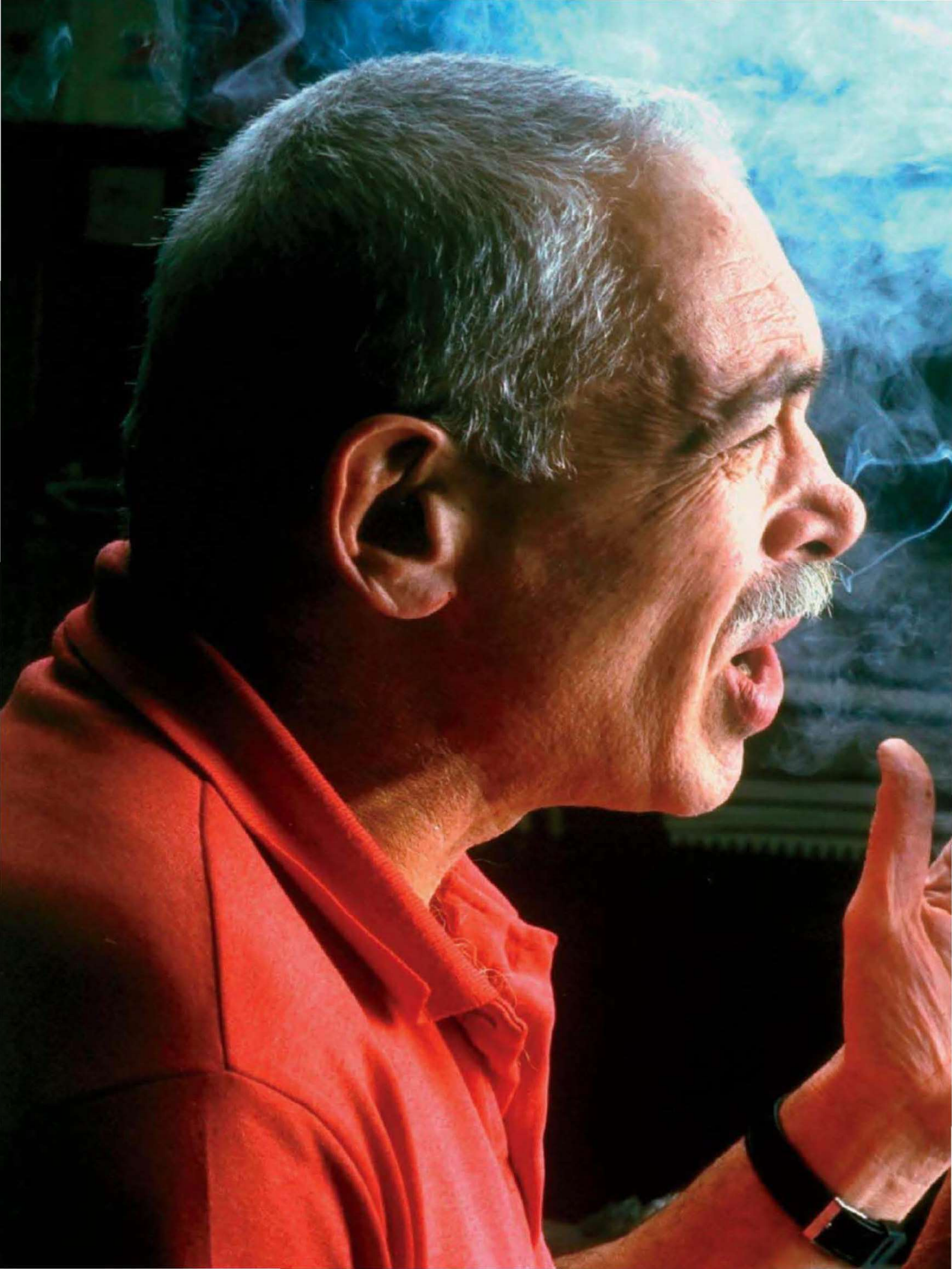


*WITH A DEEP APPRECIATION OF THE GAME AND AN INCISIVE EYE, **PAUL ZIMMERMAN** WAS ABLE TO TELL SOME OF FOOTBALL'S GREATEST STORIES. HERE ARE A FEW*

THE TAO OF Z

***FOR 48 YEARS** Paul Zimmerman covered the NFL, first as a reporter and columnist at three New York City daily newspapers, then, from 1979 to 2008, as a* SPORTS ILLUSTRATED *senior writer. He had nearly completed work on his personal memoirs when a series of strokes in '08 left him largely unable to speak, read or write. Peter King, editor-in-chief of The MMQB, has collected and edited Zimmerman's work for a book to be released in September.*

The first pro football locker room I ever saw was in 1960—Franklin Field in Philadelphia, for the Eagles-Packers NFL championship game. I had been with the *New York World-Telegram and Sun* for six months covering high school sports, and I'd worked on the night desk in the summer, before the schools started, with the Little League World Series as my only bylined piece. The editors wanted to see how I would handle myself in the big arena, so they assigned me to get loser's dressing room quotes for our regular pro football writer, Joe King. It was a disaster.

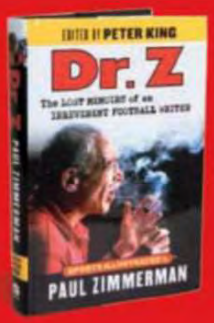
The problem was that I was spending my Saturday nights playing guard for the Paterson (N.J.) Pioneers of the Eastern Football Conference, which billed itself as either Minor League Football or the NFL's farm system. Take your pick, but in reality it was one of the many outposts of semipro football. The Packers lost to the Eagles, but afterward I couldn't get over the way the Green Bay middle three of Jim Ringo and Fuzzy Thurston and Jerry Kramer had crushed the center of Philly's defense,

BY PAUL ZIMMERMAN

Photograph by HEINZ KLUETMEIER

THE FRONT LINES

Drawing from his experience as a lineman, which included time at Stanford during the 1950s, Zimmerman could talk X's and O's with the likes of Lombardi.



This excerpt from *Dr. Z: The Lost Memoirs of an Irreverent Football Writer* by Paul Zimmerman is printed with the permission of Triumph Books. For more information and to order a copy, go to **www.triumphbooks.com/DrZ**

including the great Chuck Bednarik. The first guy I saw in the locker room was Thurston.

"Hey, great job against Eddie Khayat," I blurted. His eyes narrowed. He had just lost the biggest game of his life. Was this some kind of con job? "Thanks," he said. I'd been knocked out by the smoothness with which they called their in-line audibles, their changeups. I complimented him on it. By now Kramer had joined our little group. "You're a writer?" he said.

I brushed it off. I told him that we were having trouble calling our audibles on the Pioneers. I asked them how they called them. "Hey, Jim!" he called over to Ringo in the next locker. "I want you to meet this guy." So for 10 minutes or so, they laid it out for me, who made the call in each situation, how they handled the dummy calls. The Packers ran for 223 yards that day. It was a nice friendly little group, and I was thinking, Wow, it sure is great covering an NFL locker room.

Then I noticed that the room was emptying. My page of quotes for Joe King was blank. *Uh-oh*. I excused myself. I looked for Bart Starr. He was gone. Paul Hornung was being helped into his sport coat; he had suffered a pinched nerve in his shoulder.

"How's the shoulder?" I asked him.

"It hurts," he said. And he was gone. I searched for Vince Lombardi. He was almost out the door.

"Uh, Coach?" I said.

"I said everything I had to say to all the writers," he said. "We needed more time, O.K.?" And he was gone. Everybody was gone except for some equipment men loading stuff into bags. I made my way up to the press box.

Put a little pencil mustache on Humphrey Bogart, and I'd hire him to play Joe King in the movie version. Cigarette hanging out of the side of his mouth, a bottle of Heineken close by his left hand, gray fedora pushed back on his head, with his press ticket in the band, Joe was everyone's idea of what an old-time sportswriter should look like. I stood behind him and watched him type.

"O.K., whadaya got?" he said.

"What do you want?"

"Gimme Lombardi."

"He was on the way out. He said they needed more time."

"And . . . *and*?"

"And that's what he said."

"O.K., gimme Hornung. How about the shoulder?"

"He said it hurt."

By now Joe had stopped typing. He was as fascinated by the horror of this as I was. "What did Starr say?" he said so softly that I could barely hear it.

"Nope, I missed Starr," I mumbled.

He turned in his seat and stared at me. "Son, what *did* you get?"

"Well, I talked to Kramer and Thurston and Ringo about how they called their audibles, and. . . ."

He waved me away, as one would dispel a bitter memory. "Out, son. *Out!* Get *OUT!*"

It took me two years before I saw the inside of a professional football locker room again.

ONE OF the first games the *New York Post* sent me out to cover, all by myself, was Green Bay at Chicago in 1966. I set up my audience with Lombardi for Tuesday, well in advance. That's how nervous I was.

Lombardi was cordial. He asked me where I grew up and where I had played. I told him, adding that in high school we had scrimmaged against the team he was coaching, St. Cecilia in Englewood, N.J., and that I had very fond memories of his power sweep. He threw back his head and laughed. Then he called in his line coach, Phil Bengtson, who'd had the same position at Stanford when I was there, just to check me out. I'm sure Bengston didn't remember a thing about me, but just to be a mensch, he gave it the "Hey, nice to see ya. How ya been? I see that you've picked up a little weight. . . ." Whew. I had passed muster.

So we chatted for a while, and then Lombardi got real serious and said, "You're a young writer, you're from New York, I'm going to give you a good story for your paper." *Thump*, went my heart. Thump *thump*. "This is the game where I find out about my million-dollar rookies, Grabowski and Anderson. All that money we paid them [a combined $1 million, a record in those days]. . . . I've got to know whether they can play."

I was so feverish to call my paper and tell them to hold the back page because I've got a scoop from

COURTESY OF LINDA BAILEY ZIMMERMAN (ZIMMERMAN); NEIL LEIFER (LOMBARDI)

WE CHATTED FOR A WHILE, AND THEN LOMBARDI SAID, "YOU'RE A YOUNG WRITER FROM NEW YORK. I'M GOING TO GIVE YOU A GOOD STORY FOR YOUR PAPER."

Lombardi that I could hardly bear it. The next day's streamer, in red, blared, LOMBARDI TO UNVEIL MILLION DOLLAR ROOKIES.

P.S.: Neither one played a down.

And as I sat there in the press box, watching the backs of those two players, their numbers boring holes in my brain—Jim Grabowski, fullback, number 33; Donny Anderson, halfback, number 44—I prayed to whatever football gods lived high above Wrigley Field to please, please, just send them in for a series or two. Nope, zero and zero. Finally I mentioned it to one of the Packers' beat guys, Bud Lea of the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. He started laughing. "Welcome to the club," he said. "[Lombardi] knows that [Bears coach George] Halas gets everything clipped from the out-of-town papers. So he might as well plant something, just to give him another thing to worry about."

I interviewed Lombardi for the last time in May 1970, three months before he died. We were in the latter stages of the counterculture movement, campus unrest, hippies. I was curious to hear Lombardi's take on all this, and I fully expected some diatribe about people who were too lazy or selfish to work. His answer made me ashamed of myself for trying to stereotype one of the most unusual and perceptive thinkers I ever encountered.

"They're showing an awareness of things; they're making themselves heard," Lombardi said. "They have a right to say what they want, and it behooves us to listen. I don't know . . . my own lack of awareness. . . . In my own little sphere, maybe I didn't see the things I should have. My kids tell me things, and sometimes I have trouble understanding them. Well, I've got to learn."

He never had the chance.

DISAPPOINTMENT IS always part of the business. If you can't handle being put in your place from time to time, don't be a sportswriter. In the mid-1990s I was in the Colts' camp. I was almost through for the day when Tony Siragusa, their right defensive tackle, asked if he could speak to me. We talked about why the things he did were held in such low regard, why the pass rushers got the big contracts and all the publicity, how coaches always stressed a run defense but then gave all their praise to the sackers. I agreed. I hated it almost as much as he did. He was passionate on the subject, and I liked that about him.

Move ahead a few years to the press-interview day before the 2001 Super Bowl, Ravens vs. Giants.

The Baltimore players were being interviewed in the ballroom of Tampa's Hyatt Westshore Hotel. The two tables that commanded the biggest collection of writers belonged to Ray Lewis and Siragusa, a full-blown 350 pounds now, raconteur, storyteller, future color commentator for Fox. He read a newspaper during the Q-and-A session, establishing obvious unconcern. Ah, well, if that's his shtick.

FROZEN COVERAGE During the Jets' 1969 season, Namath (12) wouldn't speak to Zimmerman, then the team's beat writer for the *New York Post*. A quarter century later, the two reconnected.

"Is this Ravens defense the best in history?" someone asked.

"Name a better one," he said.

"Steel Curtain Steelers," I said.

"What are you, from Pittsburgh?" he said, looking up from his paper. "No, from Jersey, same as you," I said. A few writers laughed.

When the meeting broke up, the Goose came over to me, plainly annoyed.

"What did you want to do that for, break up my act like that?" he said. I waited a moment, just to see if there was any recognition at all.

"You don't remember me, do you?" I said.

"No," he said. "Should I?"

THERE ARE scenes that stand out in such sharp relief. One was an interview with Joe Namath on the dock behind his home in Tequesta, Fla., in 1993. In '69, my fourth year of covering the Jets with Namath as the quarterback, he stopped talking to me. *Bang!* Just like that. I thought it had something to do with the league office forcing him to get out of his nightclub, Bachelors III. I was writing from training camp, a city-side reporter on the *Post* was covering the gossip stuff, and the paper had combined our bylines.

"Hey, Jimmy, what's the story?" I asked Jimmy Walsh, Namath's agent. It's a scary thing to be a beat writer and not have access to the biggest name on your beat.

"He's just in a tough situation now," Walsh said. "He'll get over it."

It lasted for 24 years. It got ugly. A few others were in the same boat—Larry Fox, the beat writer for the New York *Daily News*, and Dick Young, the *News*'s lead columnist. Namath wouldn't even address a mass press conference if he spotted us in the crowd. He would tell other players to avoid us. You pretend to shrug it off. It stayed with me like a lingering disease.

Twenty-five years after the Super Bowl season, SI did a quarter-century retrospective, and the editors told me I'd be going down to Florida to interview Namath. I said good try, but he doesn't talk to me. They said his secretary told them it was O.K. I said his secretary didn't know who the writer was. They said, Go anyway, so I did, knowing exactly what would happen. I'd drive to his house and hear, "I'm not talking to you." I was ready for it.

What I wasn't ready for was one of the best and warmest sessions with an athlete that I'd ever experienced. He talked about his life, his disappointment in trying and failing in an acting career, how the game had affected his life. We swapped old stories about people we knew. I told him that with a few minutes to go in the Super Bowl game, I made my way down to the field so I could get position on the dressing room. I was standing next to John Sample on the sideline, behind the Jets' bench, and I said, "Great game, John." And we shook hands. And Gerry Philbin, the notoriously violent defensive end, saw us and screamed at me, "The game's not over! Get the hell out of here!"

"My arm, feel my arm," Namath said. "Goose bumps. That's what I get when I hear stories about Philbin and those guys, goose bumps." And that was the way it went for an afternoon. And finally, when I was getting back in my car, I asked him what I wanted to know for 24 years. "What did I write that bothered you so much?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't remember."

"You don't remember? You don't remember?" I said, unable to hide the anguish. "You just

NEIL LEIFER

Guy, 7
leukemia

I wish to be a
race car driver

Photo credit: Mark J. Rebilas

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about ruined my life and you don't remember?"

"Well, I was different then," he said. "I was more aggressive."

UNYIELDING SPIRITS After decades of covering Hall of Famers like Taylor (56), the 84-year-old Zimmerman (below, with wife Linda in 2016) has a lifetime full of memories.

I'VE BEEN asked what was the greatest play I've ever seen. Steve Young's 49-yard gallop that left Vikings tacklers all over the field in 1988 comes to mind, but emotionally, I can't get away from a play I saw Lawrence Taylor make in '83 against the Redskins. In the context of the game, it was almost meaningless; the Giants were down by 10, and on the chart it was a 15-yard run by Joe Theismann. Taylor, rushing from the right wing, gripped 300-pound left tackle Joe Jacoby by the shoulder pads and threw him, pushing Theismann out of the pocket, and the quarterback was off and running, with LT in pursuit. George Starke, the right tackle, peeled back to pick up Taylor, who knocked Starke to the ground without breaking stride. Fifteen yards downfield, Taylor brought Theismann down. He had disposed of 560 pounds' worth of offensive linemen and run down a 4.6 quarterback. Nowhere was the play ever mentioned.

I close my eyes and see Taylor, bent over in pain, by his locker after he had recorded three sacks against the Saints, single-handedly turning the game for the Giants, playing under the pain of a torn pectoral muscle. Bill Parcells knelt in front of Taylor and leaned over, and they touched foreheads.

"I didn't think you'd make it," the coach said.

"I didn't either," Taylor said.

MAYBE IT'S because the sporting arena is such a vibrant place, but it's very hard to accept the death of its dynamic performers. I just can't picture Walter Payton dead. I keep remembering the time I sat with him in the lobby of the Bears' dorm at their training camp in Lake Forest, Ill. He brought his motorcycle in and placed it next to a wall, and as I talked to him, he just couldn't sit still, his words coming as fast as his movements, a dizzying capsule of energy itself. It was getting dark outside, and in the dim light of the lobby Payton actually seemed to glow; it was as if an aura was emanating from him. Fascinating, a little scary, unforgettable. How could he have died at 45?

I wrote a book with defensive end Lyle Alzado, who died in 1992. After I got to know him, he didn't hold back. He was the only player who ever told me that he was using anabolic steroids while he was an active player. Six seasons after I did the book, Alzado played in the '84 Super Bowl for the Raiders against the Redskins. The Raiders won big. He'd been a consistent force, exerting pressure on Theismann. The locker facilities in Tampa Stadium were cramped. Maneuvering was tough, as it normally is after a Super Bowl, and I was struggling to get my quotes, inching through the mass of bodies. All of a sudden, someone was gripping my arm. It was Alzado. His eyes looked wild.

"I've got to talk to you," he said.

"Jesus, Lyle," I said. "Now? Right now?"

"Yeah, now. Let's go in back."

I didn't know what had happened, a major felony, someone busted for drugs, what? We went into a back area, behind the trainers' rooms and the washing machines and the piles of dirty uniforms, into almost pitch darkness.

"What? What is it?" I asked him.

He stared at me for a moment. "How'd I play?"

Phew, what a relief. "Great, you played great, Lyle."

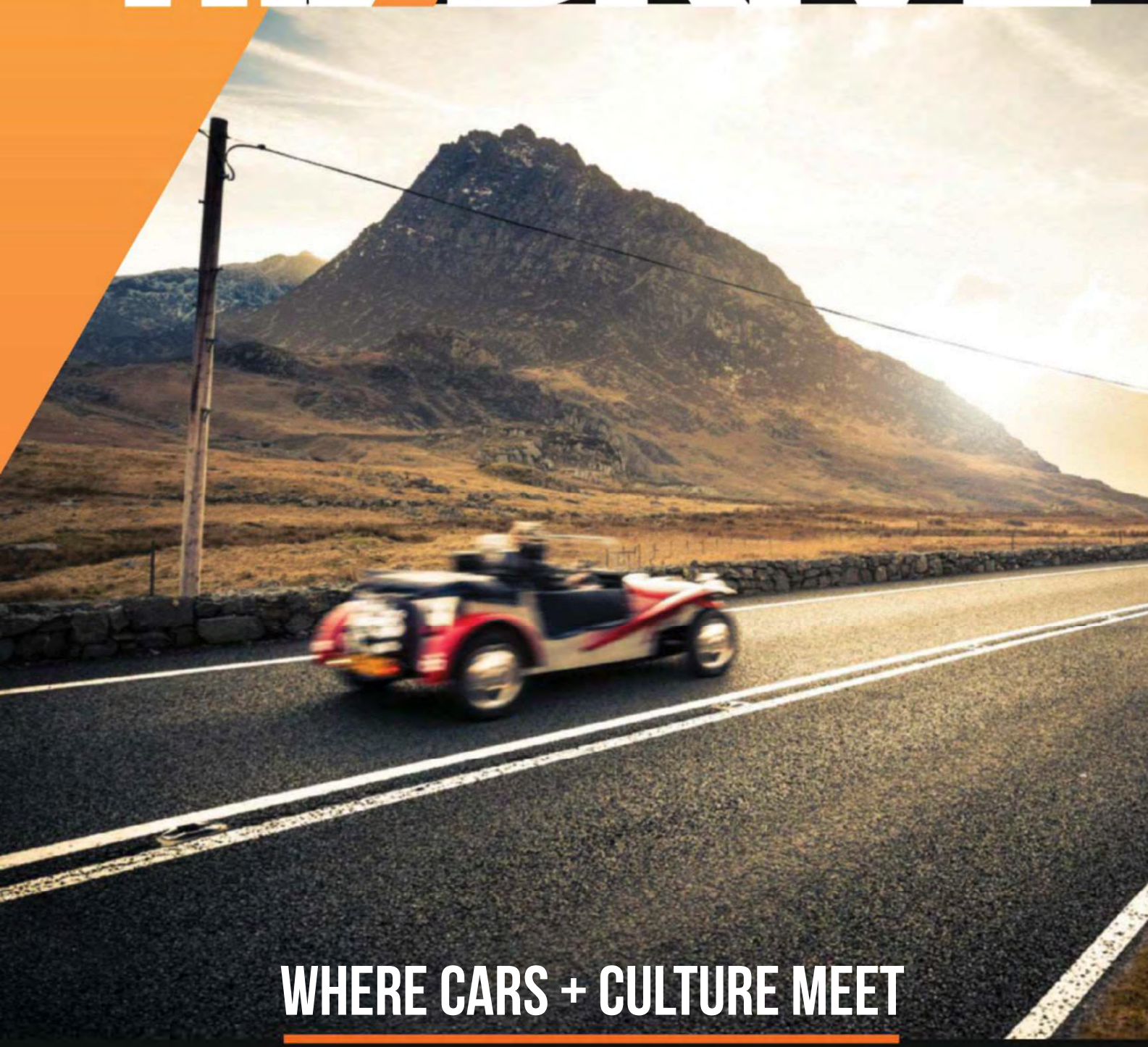
"Really? You're not s------- me?"

"Really."

"Thanks," he said. □

JOHN BIEVER (TAYLOR); COURTESY OF LINDA BAILEY ZIMMERMAN

THE DRIVE



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MISS UNDERSTOOD

→ BY GREG BISHOP

THE "BIGGEST BLAIR WALSH fan in the Midwest" watched her favorite kicker line up for a game-winning attempt against the Seahawks in a wild-card game on Jan. 10, 2016. When the kick hooked wide left, ending the Vikings' season, 14-year-old Camryn Nasman cried hysterically and punched the floor of the family room in Spooner, Wis. "I had always had a crush on him, so of course I wasn't mad," she says. "But then I went on Facebook and saw how much hate was being thrown at him."

A few days later Camryn spied a television segment on Walsh's visit to Northpoint Elementary, just north of Minneapolis. First-graders there had written him notes of encouragement. One student told Walsh he wished he had made the field goal but loved him anyway. Another called him the "best kicker in the universe," while another told him "better luck next time."

Camryn was impressed with how Walsh blamed no one but himself. "I kicked it," Walsh says. "The ball left my foot. That's on me."

At that point Camryn hadn't told anyone she had been suffering from depression. That's partly why she connected so deeply with Walsh, because she, too, dealt with bullies and online hatred. Her mother, Rikki Pardun, knew that Camryn struggled with anxiety, but she only found out about her daughter's depression four months after the missed kick, in May 2016, when a guidance counselor called from school, patching her and Camryn into a suicide hotline. Camryn had told the counselor she planned to kill herself that night.

Pardun then made the toughest decision of her life, committing Camryn to a hospital for a week. When Vikings camp started in July, Camryn begged her mom to take her to a practice, where she filled out three postcards for Walsh. Under the heading "Good luck/This season I hope you . . . " Camryn wrote ". . . continue to inspire people like me everyday. Last year I developed depression because I cared so much about what people thought about me. Thoughts like harming myself flooded my head and I began to self harm. . . . The whole world seemed to be against you, but you had the most positive attitude ever. You inspired me and I stopped cutting. . . . You're the reason I didn't give up."

"The whole world seemed to be against you, but you had the most positive attitude. You inspired me. **You're the reason I didn't give up,"** Camryn wrote to Walsh.

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Walsh learned what she had written midway through the season, after he had missed two field goals in the opener and two more in the first eight games. He also failed to convert three extra points over that stretch.

Camryn continued to struggle too. One day in September she collected as many pills as she could find and threw them in a bag. She says she planned to swallow them the next morning, but when she woke up that day, she had a voice mail from the Vikings. Walsh wanted to meet with her.

They met at the team offices a month later. Walsh didn't want to overstate what he had been through. His struggle could not compare to her depression. "But if I could help change how she viewed herself, that would be huge," Walsh says.

A month later the Vikings released Walsh. As some fans continued to ridicule him online, he tried to remain positive. So did Camryn. She'd write whenever she thought of harming herself, and the words spilled into pages and pages. Eventually they became a book. She decided to self-publish what she had written—*The Girl Behind the Smile* (available at createspace.com)—and spare none of the uncomfortable details. "She started to feel like she had a purpose," her mom says.

The man who shanked the Vikings' playoff kick against Seattle walked into the Seahawks office in January, almost exactly a year after the miss. He signed a contract with Seattle, of all teams.

"I'm fortunate," Walsh says.

"I'm lucky," Camryn says.

There's no neat ending here. Walsh won't make every kick this season. Camryn's depression wasn't magically cured. But both faced something difficult and sought help, drawing strength from one another. □

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